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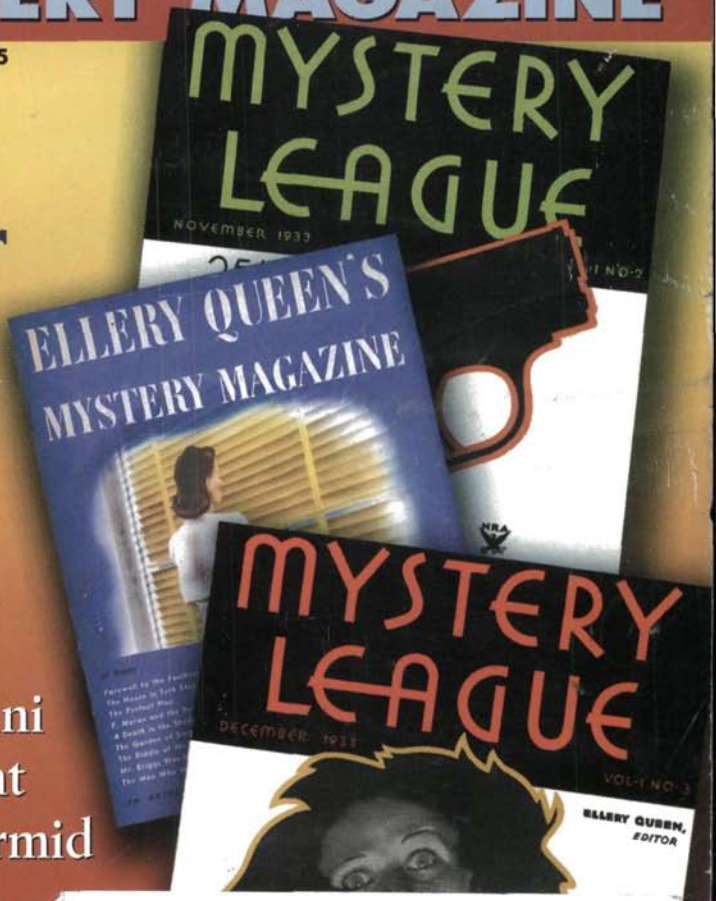

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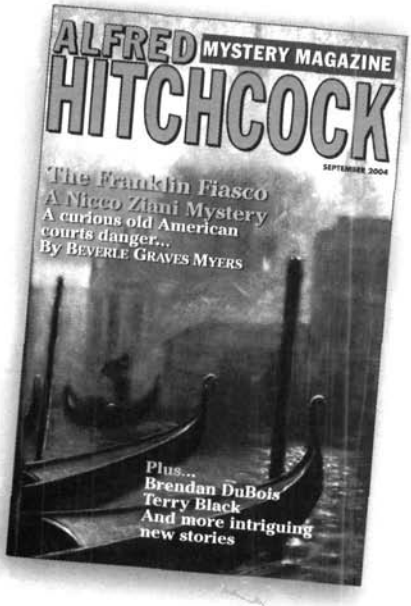

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Ellery Queen, Editor

There is probably no famous author in history other than Ellery Queen of whom it could be debated seriously whether the contributions he or she made were greater in the sphere of writing or editing. Though Ellery Queen's enormous importance as a detective writer inspired critic Anthony Boucher to say "Ellery Queen *is* the American detective story," Frederic Dannay (one half of the two-man Queen team) is said to have wondered whether the most enduring part of the Queen legacy might ultimately prove to be the anthologies and critical studies Queen produced, and above all, this magazine. To celebrate the achievements of Ellery Queen—as we will be doing throughout this centenary year—and not give space to Queen's various editorial roles would be unthinkable.

The earliest appearance of Editor Queen was at the helm of the 1933–34 magazine *Mystery League.* In the article that leads this issue, Jon L. Breen gives us a glimpse of what was inside the four now very hard to find issues that comprised the full run of that first brave magazine devoted to "quality" detective and crime fiction. The two magazines of which Queen was founding editor, *Mystery League* and *EQMM,* grew out of the longstanding scholarly and critical interests of the two men who assumed the Queen pseudonym, Frederic Dannay and Manfred B. Lee. So it is not surprising that at the same time Queen was launching *EQMM,* he was compiling and editing perhaps the most important anthology of detective fiction ever to see print: *101 Years' Entertainment: The Great Detective Stories 1841–1941.* In the early years of *EQMM,* Queen drew on the extensive knowledge of detective-fiction history displayed in the drawing together of that volume to introduce the magazine's readers to forgotten or overlooked gems of mystery fiction. In turn, both *Mystery League* and *EQMM* provided the seeds out of which other scholarly, critical, and editorial projects grew.

Editor Queen's name appears on some one hundred mystery fiction anthologies and collections, many of them consisting primarily of stories from *EQMM.* One of the more notable of the books is *The Golden Thirteen,* a collection of the winners of the Worldwide Short Story Contests sponsored by *EQMM* in its early years. These contests stand as one of Queen's great editorial accomplishments. They served to bring attention to and help realize his goal of "raising the sights of mystery writers generally" so that mystery fiction might be accorded a highly respected place in the literary world. Nowadays the literary quality of mystery fiction is so often touted we take it for granted that the field attracts many "serious" writers. But Queen was one of the first to articulate the belief that a mystery story could at the same time serve literary ends. And so successful was he in promoting his contests that submissions

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poured in from all over the globe, not only by mystery-fiction luminaries but by authors of literary renown such as William Faulkner.

Another laudable innovation of Editor Queen was the establishment, in *EQMM*, of a "Department of First Stories" in which unknown authors could make their debut alongside the likes of Agatha Christie and Dashiell Hammett. Stanley Ellin, subsequent multiple Edgar Allan Poe Award winner, was one of several new talents first published in *EQMM* who went on to mystery stardom. One would not want to forget, either, in the list of things he was either the first or the best at, Queen's seminal critical work on short mystery fiction, *Queen's Quorum,* a reference sought by fans and scholars to this day.

Much more could be said about Editor Queen, but in these highlights of his career, readers will see, we hope, why many consider him the best editor, critic, and scholar the field has ever produced. To readers interested in pursuing the subject further, we highly recommend Francis M. Nevins's *Royal Bloodlines,* and, of course, the following piece by award-winning reviewer and writer Jon L. Breen.

The Too-Short Saga of *Mystery League*

by Jon L. Breen

Over thirty years ago, a dying mystery fan offered a treasure from his collection by mail auction: mint copies of all four issues of the legendary *Mystery League,* the first editorial project of the Ellery Queen team and thus a significant precursor of *EQMM*. My winning bid was $100 for the set. At the time, it seemed an absurd price to pay for four old magazines. In retrospect, it was a bargain.

Mystery League was initially a Chicago-based book publishing imprint. Between 1930 and early 1933, their handsome hardcovers by writers like Edgar Wallace, Miles Burton, and the team of Gwen Bristow and Bruce Manning were sold through the United Cigar Stores for fifty cents at a time when the standard price was two dollars. When the imprint ended with a total of thirty volumes, it was replaced by the high-class pulp magazine that proclaimed on its back cover, "Beginning with this issue, *Mystery League* comes to its host of enthusiasts in new form, embodying not only its original plan but an expansion of that plan—a new full-length work together with distinctive new short stories from authors of international reputation (witness the contents of this issue)—and at a price so in keeping with the times [i.e., twenty-five cents] as to make it required reading for every ardent armchair sleuth." Subscribers at $2.50 for one year (an overly optimistic projection as it turned out) could choose any two of three Mystery Library books offered on the

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inside back cover as a sweetener.

The 160-page first issue, dated October 1933, lived up to the publisher's claims. The striking cover shows a Sherlock Holmes profile in silhouette with a black-backgrounded photo of three worried-looking people inside. "Ellery Queen, Editor" is proclaimed to the lower right of the photo. The lead novel was arguably more distinguished than anything the League had published in hard covers: *Drury Lane's Last Case* (86,431 words, the cover proclaimed) by Barnaby Ross, not then known to be a second pseudonym of Ellery Queen (i.e., Frederic Dannay and Manfred B. Lee). The short stories, Dorothy L. Sayers's "Suspicion," Dashiell Hammett's "Nightshade," and Ellery Queen's dying-message classic, "The Glass-Domed Clock," could scarcely have been more impressive in quality and marquee value. They were joined by the first installment of a nonfiction feature, "Secrets of Houdini" by J.C. Cannell, and a short story by the pseudonymous John Marvell, whose true identity the editors claimed not to know. (Whether this was an established writer's nom de plume or EQ's first "first story" I do not know.) Inside the front cover is a photograph of *the mysterious masked editor, in reality Manfred B. Lee.*

Though both Queens edited *Mystery League,* they were not yet known to the world as a double act and addressed their readers as an editorial "I". (Ironically, though *EQMM* was usually edited by Fred Dannay alone, there Queen would always be "we".) Their introductory editorial, "Through the Looking Glass," promises to stress quality stories over big names, grouses about the common magazine practice of hyping as a complete novel something much shorter, and vows to include real novel-length wordage. Queen also signs a gossip/opinion column "To the Queen's Taste," which discusses the Conan Doyle/Houdini association, invites reader nominations for a list of the ten best detective novels, suggests that the current kidnapping epidemic demonstrates the need for an American equivalent of Scotland Yard, and notes that President Roosevelt has established a national Department of Investigation under John Edgar Hoover. The chatty editor goes on to discuss the title patterns used by various authors. While the suggestions for their colleagues (The Topaz Murder Case, The Omniscience of Father Brown, and About the Murder of the Policeman's Bride) were not taken up by S.S. Van Dine, G.K. Chesterton, and Anthony Abbot respectively, and Dannay and Lee would never produce a fifth Barnaby Ross novel called The Tragedy of AAA, there would shortly be a novel using the suggested Queen example, The Siamese Twin Mystery. Editor Queen goes on to make the case for an American Indian detective, predicting that someone eventually would write of a full-blooded Indian detective with characteristics of his world and the white man's world. (It would happen years later, first in a pair of 1940s *EQMM* short stories by Manly Wade Wellman, then in the past thirty years in novels by Tony Hillerman and others.) An obituary

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notes the passing of Earl Derr Biggers, celebrating the great Charlie Chan and his screen portrayal by Warner Oland.

Finally, the editors introduce a 100-point rating system to be applied to detective novels, with a maximum ten points each awarded to plot, suspense, surprise solution, analysis of solution, style, characters, setting, method of murder, clues, and fairness to the reader. Of course, the modest editors could not in good conscience rate any Ellery Queen novels in this way, but they had no such compunction about giving their lead novel by Barnaby Ross an 84% rating, superior to acknowledged classics by Van Dine, A.E.W. Mason, Agatha Christie, E.C. Bentley, and Earl Derr Biggers, while trailing only Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (86%). Finally, the editors invite reader response on the stories in the issue, also asking their preferences on serials, reprints, and articles. There is even a three-page puzzle department, including a crossword.

This first issue had very little advertising: full pages for a $1-per-month life insurance firm, foreign language records, International Correspondence Schools, and the U.S. School of Music; small ads for LaSalle Extension University law and accounting courses; and an ad for *Mystery League* itself, offering copies of their leftover hardcovers at fifty cents a pop.

The second issue, November 1933, featured Phoebe Atwood Taylor's *The Riddle of Volume Four* (71,281 words), the first novel about Shakespeare look-alike Leonidas Witherall, whose later cases she would chronicle as Alice Tilton. In their lead editorial, the enthusiastic editors compare Taylor to P.G. Wodehouse, Clarence Budington Kelland, and Agatha Christie, though they will admit in the next issue her novel is not amenable to their hundred-point rating system. Short stories by G.D.H. and M.I. Cole, Henry Wade, and Marvell were joined by the beginning of a serial, *Drums Beat at Night* by Gavin Holt. Describing the tough life of an editor, "To the Queen's Taste" mentions consumption of bromo-seltzer (sic the lower case), an omen of radio sponsor to come. Other subjects include how writing mysteries is less harmful to serious literary reputation in Britain than in the U.S.; some early results of the ten-best survey (Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" leads the pack, while listing of EQ novels is modestly banned but Ross's *The Tragedy of Y* weighs in at number nine); why 1900 was not a leap year; the shortage of humorous mysteries, including a suggestion that Frank Sullivan should write one; a championing of Dracula against the claims of Guy Endore's recent Werewolf of Paris, including a reference to the famous critic Alexander Woollcott as "my old friend Alec"; and a celebration of pioneer detective novelist Anna Katharine Green, then still living. A listing of new mystery novels offers not reviews but brief descriptions. Some additional entries in the rating chart include a 90% rating (the highest yet!) to Maurice Leblanc's *813*, though the editors admit fair play and analy-

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sis of solution are non-factors in "the classic mystery-adventure novel of all time," and an 86% for Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles,* "Doyle's only legitimate full-length mystery." Things are looking up on the advertising front: the DeSoto 6 (inside front cover: "They know what's Smart . . . on the Riviera") and Plymouth 6 (back cover: "The whole Family approves Dad's choice of a Plymouth Sedan . . . [E]ven the pup likes the Plymouth") are priced at $665 and $445 respectively. Though the more expensive DeSoto would drop out after this issue, Plymouth would stay the course.

The third issue, December 1933, represents a marked decrease in big names among the contributors. In an early example of the Queenian willingness to criticize stories being published, the lead novel, Brian Flynn's *The Spiked Lion* (80,750 words), is scored on the analytical chart. Analysis of solution gets a good 8% mark: "Excellent deductive reasoning, but not perfect. At least one important omission. (Can you spot it?)" Setting gets the lowest mark, a 6%: "The least inspired element of the novel. No element of originality, but of its kind handled ably." Total score is 75%, "a splendid mark for a totally unheralded novel . . . 25 points above the average poor novel." The passing years have not enhanced the reputation of the prolific Flynn.

Joining the serial and a third Marvell story about rogue Otto Burlingame are shorts by Gerald Aswell and Thomas Walsh, who would later be a contributor to this magazine for some thirty years, winning an Edgar for one of his *EQMM* stories. The editorial discusses results of the reader survey: negative on serials (thus Holt's will be the last), mixed on classic reprints (editor Queen clearly wants to do some), positive on mystery articles.

"To the Queen's Taste" asks why H.G. Wells, "the Jules Verne of today . . . [has] never written a detective story" and suggests one set in the future in a brilliant short essay that never uses the term "science fiction" though that is clearly its subject. Top choice in the ten-best voting is now Van Dine's *The Greene Murder Case,* followed by Collins's *The Moonstone* and Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles,* with Ross's *The Tragedy of X* in fourth place ahead of Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd.* The chatty feature also includes thoughts on accuracy in mystery fiction and the necessity to consult experts in law, medicine, and criminal justice; a discussion of the ethics of providing methods of murder to the public (Queen rightly points out that fiction-style murder plots simply don't occur in real life); and quotation of the detective sequence in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn.*

What makes this third issue in many ways the most interesting of the four is the introduction of a feature that was standard in the pulps but would never be replicated in *EQMM*: a six-page letters-to-the-editor column. Among the contributors are Louise Rice, an "eminent graphologist and author," who wants better covers and disbelieves the editors' promise of something new; detective novelist Carolyn Wells, who notes Van Dine's titles all had six-letter-word

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murder cases so Topaz wouldn't do and claims to read every detective story published "except underworld or gangster ones"; a writer named Jay Stockhardt who puts his letter in code (and yes, editor Queen is able to crack it); self-proclaimed half-a-million-word pulp writer Hector Gavin Grey, who assures editor Queen that "trying to get magazine readers by book fiction" is folly; and the prolific poet and novelist, later Arkham House publisher, August W. Derleth, who champions short stories over novels. An interesting discussion of the off-putting covers on other detective pulps, in contrast to the classy covers of *Mystery League,* foreshadows the controversy over *EQMM*'s racy newsstand covers in the 1950s. Remarkably, to a present-day reader, full addresses are given for most of the writers. Among the listed correspondents whose letters are not printed are J.D. MacDonald of Utica, NY, presumably John D. of later fame (and an occasional *EQMM* contributor), and Clayton Rawson, who years later would be a managing editor of *EQMM*.

In what would prove to be the final issue, January 1934, the handwriting was clearly on the wall. The page count has been reduced to 128 from 160. The letters column is gone. With even the International Correspondence Schools pulling the plug, the only remaining out-of-house ad is the back cover touting the faithful Plymouth 6 ("I know Plymouth costs less—we've had THREE!") With it all, the editorial enthusiasm seems undiminished.

The cover features *The Mystery of the Black Gate* (74,865 words) by B.G. Quin, a British writer even more obscure than Brian Flynn. Also included are stories by Viola Brothers Shore, an *EQMM* contributor years later, and Charles G. Booth, plus the end of Gavin Holt's serial. The much briefer editorial has been moved to the inside front cover, where it grades Quin 78%, awarding a full ten to the author for his fair play and analysis of clues but dinging him with a six on setting, apparently the category on which the editors were toughest to please. "To the Queen's Taste" reviews Vincent Starrett's *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes;* announces an upcoming Queen/Ross lecture tour, in which Ross will murder Queen each night; asks readers to communicate their favorite outré murder methods; celebrates the end of Prohibition on November 7, 1933; and recaps the latest (and, it turns out, final) ten-best standings. The top five choices remain the same but have changed order slightly, Van Dine retaining the lead, followed by Doyle, Christie, Collins, and Ross. Ironically, of those five, *The Greene Murder Case* is surely the least likely to figure in such a list if compiled today.

According to Francis M. Nevins's critical study *Royal Bloodline: Ellery Queen Author and Detective* (1974), a fifth issue was "assembled but never printed." So ended *Mystery League* magazine, yet another casualty of Depression-era business conditions but a tantalizing precursor of the anthologies and bibliographies to come. Plus, of course, the magazine you hold in your hand. ●

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Art by Allen Davis

AND SO TO BEDLAM

by Neil Schofield

To: The Editor,
Man o' War

Sir,

Having read that fine yarn "With Palette and Brush Up the Hindu Kush" in your admirable publication, I wonder whether the author, a Captain C. Drinkwater, would be the same Clive "Loopy" Drinkwater at whose side I soldiered for many years and with whom I shared many droll experiences both here in the Old Country and in foreign climes. If so, may a simple soldier crave the hospitality of your pages to assure your readers that "Loopy" is one of the finest men ever to serve Her Gracious Majesty and the best and most faithful chum a chap could ever wish to have. I might add that my door is always open, should dear old "Loopy" ever wish to visit self and spouse and accept the hospitality of a former messmate and brother-in-arms.

I remain, sir,
Your devoted reader,

Maj. James "Jimbo" Garside (Retd.)
"Dar-es-Salaam"
Parson's Bottom,
Cambs.

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❖ ❖ ❖

When, over breakfast in the morning room at "Dar-es-Salaam," Jimbo Garside showed the latest issue of *Man o' War* to Mrs. Maj. Garside and with a certain pride pointed out this letter, she told him he was a perfect cretin and went off to prepare for her coffee morning at the Women's Institute, in which she was an activist member of the Militant Wing. Mrs. Garside was a large woman, and when she Made An Exit it was an impressive sight. But she paused at the morning-room door to point out that the penultimate sentence should have ended with a question mark, since the simple soldier had started out to ask a question but, exhilarated by the giddy literary tiderace, had clearly forgotten this fact by the time he reached the end of the sentence. In addition, if it was now going to be open house for all manner of riffraff and barrack-sweepings, could he please not refer to her as the spouse of self? She found this not only rotten English but also maladroit. And finally, who on earth was "Loopy" Drinkwater? She certainly didn't remember any "Loopy" Drinkwater. He definitely hadn't been on her father's staff. With this she swept out, leaving Jimbo dispiritedly chewing the last of his bacon and toast.

The darkly comic situations in many of Neil Schofield's stories seem ideally suited for adaptation to radio, film, or television. Nowhere do we get a better sense of this than in this new story about a daffy ex-military man who falls prey to a more sinister, if equally unbalanced, character. Mr. Schofield currently lives in France; he is a past finalist in our Readers Award competition, and one of our best short story writers. ☨

He had always been a disappointment to the Memsahib, he knew, ever since he had retired as a mere major, which she had told him more than once was the sign of abject failure. All right, fair dos, he wasn't very bright, never had been, but he could tell the Mem was vexed, that was clear, he just couldn't for the life of him see why. Mind you, she had always been tiptop on the old grammar, going so far as to vet and correct his personal messages on last year's Christmas cards. In red pen, what was more.

Oh, Lord.

He stared at himself in the hall mirror, adjusting his tie before leaving to catch his train up to town for a meeting with his solicitor. He also pushed his moustache into place. His face was plump and pink and he had moist blue eyes which stared mournfully back at him. He had a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach and he knew why.

"Oh, Lord," he said to the reflected Jimbo, "the Mem's out of

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sorts. Short commons for a bit, now. Be dining on cold shoulder tonight, I shouldn't wonder, old man."

But he was an ex-soldier, and he straightened his back, knowing that some things just have to be faced, however unpleasant. He tugged fretfully at the jacket of what he called his town suit, a charcoal-grey chalk stripe.

"All because of a measly letter, too," he added to himself for good measure. "Rotten poor show on the Mem's part. And someone she doesn't even know." Because, it was true, he had remembered far too late that "Loopy" Drinkwater and he had been messmates before his secondment to General Bollingsworth's staff in KL and therefore before the advent of Mrs. Maj. Garside, née Hetty Bollingsworth. "Well, I don't care. Don't know that I won't give her a bit of cold shoulder of my own."

And with that cheering if deeply implausible thought, he left the house. At least the Memsahib had left the garage doors and the main gates open for him when she left in her Morris shooting brake.

Before leaving, he took a stroll around the orchard, or what he liked to call the orchard, to take a roll call of the Ribstone Pippins and the Cox's Orange. In fact, there were barely twenty trees, but it was a pleasant quarter-acre or so, to which Jimbo frequently escaped when the Mem was out of sorts, or to smoke a last cigar before turning in. The whole property was bounded by a high wall of venerable weathered red brick, built when the house and grounds were owned by the local squire. This gave Jimbo the pleasant feeling of being in a fortified place, and kept the villagers out. Not that the villagers often wanted to come in, especially when the Mem was out of sorts.

He drove his ancient Rover out of the high wooden gates, which he religiously closed lest the underclasses should gawp importunately at the imposing frontage of Dar-es-Salaam, a habit which the Mem was intent on stamping out. Driving down the lane which led to the main village street and then to the station, Jimbo tried to remember the last occasion on which he and Loopy Drinkwater had soldiered together.

"Singapore," Jimbo said aloud, hastily returning the salute of Sergeant Bosworth, who comprised the sole and entire police presence in Handlebury, "Singapore is where it was. Dear old Loopy. Wonder what he's doing now."

At half-past nine three mornings later, someone pulled the vast iron handle at the front door of Dar-es-Salaam, which rang the equally monumental bell in the hall.

Jimbo was alone in the kitchen at that time, the Mem having gone off to one of her W.I. meetings to plan the logistics of preparing rhubarb tarts and apple turnovers with which they were later

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due to pelt an under-secretary of state for agriculture as a protest against something. Peltings were a regular and popular activity for the members of the Handlebury W.I., which was viewed by most competent authorities as a Home Counties version of the Shining Path.

Jimbo had just put his dishes neatly in the sink for Mrs. Whipple, their cleaning lady and occasional cook, and was vaguely planning his morning, when the bell rang. He went to the door.

The figure who greeted him on the doorstep was a slight man in a violently green suit and a brown trilby. He had a narrow face, close-set eyes, and a traplike mouth surmounted by a bristly ginger moustache. Jimbo looked at him.

"Jimbo!" said the man, "Jimbo, after all these years! It's me, ol' man. It's Loopy! Loopy Drinkwater! Don't tell me you've forgotten your old messmate."

"Good God," said Jimbo. "Good God. Loopy, can it really be you?"

"None other, ol' man. Was in the neighbourhood, saw your picket lines, and thought I'd respond to your kind invitation."

Indeed, now Jimbo realised that there was a brown suitcase standing at the other man's feet.

"Good God," he said. "Good God."

"Aren't yer going to ask a chap in, then, Jimbo?"

Jimbo stood aside dumbly and waved the man in. To tell the truth, he was shocked at the change in his old friend and messmate. Loopy had lost at least forty pounds in weight and an inch in height. He must have been through it a bit, thought Jimbo, seen some hard times. The same hard times had also apparently caused a pronounced strabismus in his right eye.

"Good God, Loopy," said Jimbo, "you've changed a bit, I must say, ol' man."

"Been through the mill a bit, Jimbo, since we last raised a glass." Loopy put down his suitcase by the hall stand. "When was that, by the way? I've been trying to think."

"Singapore," said Jimbo, "Singapore. I was trying to remember myself only the other day."

"Ah," said Loopy, "Singapore. That's it. It's coming back to me now. Gin Slings in the Long Bar at Raffles, wasn't it? Speaking of which—"

"Come through," said Jimbo, "and I'll show you the rest of the old place."

"Show me to the drinks tray, ol' man, that's all I need at the moment."

So Jimbo led Loopy into the sitting room and sat him down in an armchair by the empty fireplace, then prepared a stiff brandy and soda for Loopy and a much weaker one for himself. He wondered what the Mem was going to have to say about this. Spirits

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at half-past nine. Oh, Lord.

He sat down in another armchair and raised his glass.

"Mud in yer eye," said Loopy, and swigged, which did not prevent the rogue eye from fixing Jimbo unnervingly over the rim of the glass.

"I can't get over how you've changed, ol' man," said Jimbo. "I hardly recognised you."

"Well, ol' man, that's what wars do for yer. Knock yer about a bit. Knock bits off yer."

"But you're retired now, Loopy, surely."

"Oh, a chap with his wits about him can always find someone to come up with the dibs," said Loopy, smiling at Jimbo to reveal brownish teeth. "Experience. 'S what they're short of, yer see. Specially in Africa and the Asias."

Jimbo nodded slowly. "Well, Loopy, it's jolly nice to see you again. After all this time."

"Could have knocked me down with a feather when I saw yer letter in *Man o' War,*" said Loopy. "I thought, have to look old Jimbo up one of these days and accept his kind invitation. And lo and behold, few days later, where should I be, arranging a bit of business, but in the locality. And here we are."

Jimbo's heart was sinking.

"Absolutely delighted, ol' man," he said. A lie. "And the Mem'll be absolutely delighted, too." An outrageous lie. And demonstrably so that evening when the Mem walked into the kitchen, flushed from tart-throwing and with the light of battle still in her eyes, to find the worthy Mrs. Whipple preparing potatoes in a vicious, tight-lipped, I-never-saw-the-like sort of way. She also found, in a sitting room filled with a disgusting blue fog, two men who reeked of spirits and who had quite clearly been drinking all day.

When she walked in, Jimbo immediately jumped to his feet.

"Gah," he said, without knowing exactly why, "Hetty, my dearest, look who's come to see us." He had a dangerous colour, did Jimbo, and his movements were not those of a man in full command of himself. "Allow me ter introduce dear old Captain Drinkwater. Dear old Loopy, this is my dear old wife." This last did not go down as well as it might have.

They looked at each other. The Mem saw a hideous suit, unnecessarily green, crumpled up in an armchair like a badly-wrapped parcel. Inside it was a small ratlike individual who seemed to be not so much wearing the suit as leaking very slowly out of it. Loopy, seeing a large woman with grey hair like steel wool, piercing blue eyes, not entirely unprotruding, and a chin like a Russian Navy icebreaker, knew instantly what those Easter Island johnnies had been banging on about.

Loopy clambered out of his armchair and approached the Mem

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in what could only be described as a controlled fall. He put out his hand.

"Ter meetcher, Mrs. Jimbo," he said. "Jimbo's been tellin' me all aboutcher, the lucky bounder. Have ter say he didn't do yer justice."

The Mem took the very tips of two of his fingers in her hand and gave them the tiniest shake.

"And to what," she said, "do we owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"Jimbo's been kind enough to offer me a cot in your splendid residence for a night or two."

Jimbo jumped in.

"Least we can do, Hetty, old thing," he said, "seein' as Loopy's in the neighbourhood on business."

"Really?" The Mem was clearly in the grip of some strong emotion and her tone could have stripped paint. "And what sort of business might that be, Captain Drinkwater? *If* one might ask."

Loopy tapped the side of his nose and eyed her slyly, while at the same time, she noticed, also eyeing the fireplace.

"Buyin' and sellin'," he said, "can't say more, y'understand. Other parties involved. Wouldn't be aboveboard."

"Quite," said Jimbo, "quite understand."

"Well," said the Mem, "that is more than I do. Dinner will be at eight sharp. James, show Captain Drinkwater to his room. The Blue Room, I think. And we do *not* smoke in the bedrooms, Captain."

When Jimbo set down the battered suitcase in the Blue Room, Loopy gave the bed a practice bounce.

"I think your wife's rather taken to me, ol' man."

Jimbo stared at him fuzzily.

"Yes," he said slowly, "I think you might be right."

Dinner that night at eight sharp was a fairly silent affair. Jimbo's attempts to engender and prolong conversation met with scant encouragement, and his gallant efforts to summon up the jolly ghosts of shared times past met with groping responses from Loopy and frigid disinterest from the Mem.

Over the soup, Jimbo tried desperately to whip up some brio.

"I say, Loopy," he said, "do you still do the old painting? Loopy," he explained to the Mem, "used to be a dab hand with the old watercolours."

"Really," said the Mem, clearly not believing it for a moment.

Loopy shook his head.

"Gave it up, ol' man. The old peepers not up to it anymore." He waved a fork dangerously close to the organs in question.

"Pity, that," Jimbo said. "I was thinking you could have painted the Mem's portrait."

"Nothing would have tickled me more," said Loopy, fixing them both earnestly, one eye each, "than to immortalise Mrs. Jimbo's classic beauty, but alas, Dame Fortune has dealt me a measly

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hand, the old cow."

Following this, silence fell again, until with no warning, halfway through the feast, Loopy began, between and through mouthfuls of roast beef, a series of off-colour reminiscences which to Jimbo seemed singularly ill-chosen for the company. He was supported in this opinion by the Mem, who, throughout the entire sequence, remained absolutely still, eyes closed and wattles quivering. At the end of the meal, which came none too soon, the Mem announced her intention of speaking to Mrs. Whipple about tasks for the following day, rose, and left the room. Loopy looked after her.

"I say, ol' man, I hope I didn't offend Mrs. Jimbo in any way."

"Good God, no. Didn't notice a thing, I'm sure," said Jimbo with an unconvincing laugh, as he thought about the reception the Mem was preparing for him. A roasting, this time, he thought. Cold shoulder was painful, but roastings were pure hell.

The Mem *had* noticed. And she noticed lots more things in the days that followed. Because Loopy's lightning visit turned out to be not as lightning as all that. But as Jimbo told her, sometimes business can take longer to transact than you thought. And *she* told *him* that, according to Mrs. Whipple, Loopy's business seemed to consist largely of loafing outside billiard halls and public houses with assorted *louche* individuals.

"He has been seen in Cambridge," said the Mem, "being extremely coarse on the public footpath."

"Chap's a right to relax a bit after he's been doing business all day."

But the Mem was having none of it. With disconcerting speed, she changed the subject. She could turn on a sixpence, the Mem could.

"In any case, you will have the goodness to ask him to stop calling me Mrs. Jimbo. My nerves are in absolute shreds. Another thing: What gives him the right to take your car to go off and do his bits of so-called business? And, I might add, to do hand-brake turns into the drive at three o'clock in the morning, the worse for drink, I have no doubt."

"Chap's got a right to some transport, Hetty," said Jimbo defensively. He too had heard Loopy's erratic entries but had, with characteristic generosity, put it all down to boyish high spirits.

"And I," said the Mem, taking no prisoners, "have the right to know why your so-called Captain Drinkwater wears his hat indoors. A hat, moreover, which is lined with BacoFoil, I happen to know."

It was true, Jimbo had noticed that Loopy wore his trilby in the house. Except at mealtimes, of course. An odd habit, but a chap who had been through it a bit had the right to the occasional odd habit.

"BacoFoil?" he said, trying a flanking move. "I didn't know we had any in the house."

"We do not," said the Mem. "Mrs. Whipple and I are against the use of aluminium in the preparation of food. It is a deadly poison.

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Which means that your Captain Drinkwater has smuggled it into the house."

"Righto," said Jimbo vaguely, beating a retreat, "see what I can do."

Tell you one thing, Jimbo said to himself that night. *Life With Loopy might be a pain, but it's never boring.* He realised that he was quite looking forward to the next Loopy outrage, and even to the roasting that would ineluctably follow it, as the night the day.

Loopy had been in residence for about three weeks when Jimbo returned home from a meeting with his bank manager and lunch at the RAC. He garaged the car and went into the kitchen, where he found the Mem sprawled full-length, facedown on the floor. He thought at first that the Mem was playing some sort of prank on him, but on reflection recalled that this sort of jape was not her style at all.

"Good Lord," he said, "Good Lord."

He had not had much experience with death, but he had had enough to know that this excessive stillness was not a sign of bouncing good health.

"Hetty," he said tentatively, "Hetty? It's James here. How goes it, old thing?"

But there was no answer from the floor.

"Oh Lord," he said, and left the kitchen, feeling rather weak around the old knees.

He went into the sitting room, went straight across to the drinks tray, and poured himself a stiff brandy, which he downed in one. He poured himself another, and then became aware that Loopy was sitting in an armchair, suited and trilbied, reading the *Sporting Times* and smoking a cigar.

"I say, Loopy," he said. "I say, I've had a bit of a blow."

Loopy looked up.

"Oh, yes?" he said. "And what's that then, ol' man?"

Jimbo sat down heavily on the sofa. "Just found the Mem in the kitchen. Lying on the floor. Stretched out. Like this." He tried, unsuccessfully, to give Loopy some idea of the posture. He took another gulp of brandy. "There's blood, too. Gave me a hell of a turn, I can tell you. Bit of a blow this, and no mistake."

Loopy looked at him vaguely.

"Sorry, ol' man, I was miles away," he said. "The Mem? Ah yes, that was probably me, I expect."

"You, Loopy? What on earth do you mean?"

"Caught her going through my doings," said Loopy. "Came home, went upstairs, and there she was going through my suitcase. She'd picked the locks with a hairpin. Going through my doings, cool as you like."

Jimbo was aghast. "With a hairpin?" He didn't know the Mem possessed any hairpins, and he had certainly never suspected that

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she had burglarial leanings. Well, there you are, he thought, you think you know someone.

"I challenged her, of course, as any man would in the circs, but she simply swep' out of the room. I caught up with her in the kitchen. She turned very nasty, very nasty indeed. Grabbed a fish-slice and came at me. Lucky I happened to have your shovel with me. Good shovel you've got there, Jimbo. Sturdy and reliable. Spear & Jackson. A fine brand, none better."

Jimbo stared at him. Mental pictures of what had evidently been a pitched battle in the kitchen swirled muddily in his imagination.

"Good Lord, Loopy. Good Lord. I mean to say—well, good Lord."

"A homicidal maniac, if you want my honest opinion. She was handling that fish-slice thing like a trained killer. Could have had my tripes out in no time flat but for a trick or two I picked up from the wily Masai. Good job you've got a good-sized kitchen, too, space for a really good swing. In a smaller room, I'd have been a goner."

"I admit, Loopy, she had her little ways, but—good Lord."

Jimbo saw that he had emptied his second glass of brandy. He got up and went to the drinks table.

"Thing is," he said, half to himself, pouring yet another brandy, "how to explain it? I mean, it's got to be explained, hasn't it? Explanations have to be given."

"My view, your best bet is a domestic accident," said Loopy. "Happens all the time. Fifty percent of all accidents happen in the home."

"Domestic accident?" said Jimbo.

Loopy got up and came across to pour a drink for himself.

"Need a bit of dressing up, of course."

"But Loopy, what sort of domestic accident?"

"Well," Loopy went and sat down again, "speaking off the top of my head, you understand, I think the best thing is, we lug the guts outside and prop a ladder against the side of the house."

"Yes?" Good old Loopy. A ray of hope glimmered through the darkness.

"Tragic story, all too common. Picture the scene. The cat climbs up onto the roof, gets stuck, wedged in the chimney, something like that, cats do it all the time. The Mem, wanting to rescue the little bugger, gets the ladder, clambers up to the roof. The cat panics, comes over vicious, I've known some like that, and turns on her. The Mem tries to prevent her unprotected gullet from being ripped out by the slashing claws and the ravening fangs, leans backwards, and there you are. Wallop, Mrs. Cox. Bob's yer uncle."

Jimbo shook his head slowly. The light at the end of the tunnel was receding again.

"Loopy, it just won't hold water. We don't have a cat. We've never had a cat."

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Loopy spoke slowly and clearly as if to a backward child.

"Well, go and buy one." He looked at his watch with one of his eyes. "You've got time, if you step on it. Or perhaps you might hire one, seeing as it's only *pro tem.* Failing that, you could pinch one. There's thousands of the little sods about in the village. I ran one over just the other day."

Jimbo felt as though he were trying to fold a newspaper in a high wind.

"But the Mem can't—couldn't stand cats, Loopy. Couldn't abide them. Wouldn't have them in the house."

"Forgive me for saying so, but just for the moment, she doesn't have much of a vote, far as I can see."

"No, Loopy." Jimbo sat down again. "It's not on. Nobody would ever believe that the Mem was shinning up the side of the house trying to rescue a moggy."

Loopy sighed and picked up his *Sporting Times.*

"Well, then, ol' man, I really don't know *what* to suggest." He spoke with the air of someone who had done all that mortal man could do to help a difficult and obtuse friend out of a nasty hole but was now, regretfully, washing his hands of the whole affair.

"Oh Lord," said Jimbo.

He was not a tremendously bright man, the simple soldier, but one thing he did know was, in circumstances like these, you had to tell someone.

"I'll have to tell someone," he said. "The police. Or someone."

"Wouldn't do that, ol' man," said Loopy sharply from behind the *Sporting Times.* "Leads to all sorts of things. You'll have snoopers and sniffers round here in a brace of shakes, digging and prying. It can lead to all sorts of things. You never know where it's all going to end. Take it from one what knows. Don't do it."

"But Loopy, it's what people do in cases like this."

"Don't you think you're being a bit selfish, ol' man? Thinking about yourself a bit there, aren't you? What about me? I think you might give a thought to an old chum before you go rushing off in all directions and dropping him into seven kinds of ca-ca."

Jimbo was in a torment of indecision. His duty was to tell someone, he knew that perfectly well. But Loopy was right. How could he do that if it meant doing the dirty on a pal?

"But what else is there, Loopy?" he said in distress. "We can't just leave the poor old Mem lying there on the kitchen floor."

Loopy put down his paper. "Tell you what, though," he said, "there's always the orchard. It's nice there. She'd like it there."

Jimbo thought about it. Trust dear old Loopy to come up with the goods. That was the thing to do, all right. As a purely temporary wheeze, until something better suggested itself, it was A-one.

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Even with the peerless Spear & Jackson shovel and Jimbo's faithful old trenching tool, it took them a good three hours to dig an appropriate hole and lay the Mem in it, wrapped in an Afghan rug she had always prized. They had almost finished filling in the hole when Jimbo had a belated and ghastly thought. He looked at his watch.

"Gosh," he said, "I'd better get a move on and clean up the kitchen. Mrs. Whipple will be coming along any moment."

Loopy stopped filling and leaned on his shovel. "Damn, blast, and a thousand buckets of excrement," he said mildly, "I knew there was something I'd forgotten."

"What's that?" Jimbo said.

"Oh, nothing, really. Simply that your Old Mother Whipple just *had* to wander in this afternoon, damn her eyes, the nosey old bat, exactly at the wrong moment, talk about your rotten luck. Completely slipped my mind, curse it."

Jimbo had a feeling of weary dread.

"I suppose—?"

Loopy nodded. "She's in the laundry cupboard."

Jimbo sighed. Oh, Lord. Better not put off until tomorrow.

There was quite an animated discussion apropos Mrs. Whipple. Loopy was all for simply scraping a couple of feet of earth off the top of the Mem and putting her there. Jimbo was adamant that this would not be seemly or dignified for either of them. His view prevailed, and they gave Mrs. Whipple her very own hole. Night had fallen long before the end, and they finished off by the light of a Tilley lamp, patting down the newly replaced turf.

Jimbo looked at the two patches of grass. Closer together now in death than they had ever been in life, he thought, and was pleased with the notion.

Loopy scraped the earth off the spade with a scrap of grass.

"Mess call," he said. "I could eat a horse."

Jimbo realised that he hadn't eaten since lunchtime. He was ravenous.

In the kitchen, Loopy foraged in fridge and cupboard and, using a variety of ingredients, cooked up something he called Stromboli, a violent and unforgiving dish, which made Jimbo's eyeballs mist up on the inside. They sat at the kitchen table and ate. Jimbo had a thought.

"I say," he said, "people'll be asking questions, though."

Loopy paused with his mouth full. "Questions about what, ol' man?"

"The Mem. And what about Mrs. Whipple?"

"Deny all knowledge," said Loopy. "Tell 'em to sling their hooks."

"There's the Mem's W. I. lot, for one thing. They're a nosey bunch. They'll be wanting to know what's happened to her."

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"Easy. You say she's gone off," said Loopy, "gone off for a little break. To see an old friend. Who's sickly. Unto death. Something lingering. Don't know when she'll be back, sickly lingering friend doesn't have a telephone. Don't bang the door on yer way out."

"Ah," said Jimbo. "Yes, I suppose. But there's her car."

Loopy tapped his nose.

"Leave it to me," he said. "Know a bloke."

Good old Loopy. There was a chap you could really depend on.

But Jimbo was still uneasy. People would be bound to come asking questions. He said so.

Loopy looked at him seriously. The wandering eye was more errant than ever.

"Only one way to deal with peepers and pryers," he said. "Give 'em short shrift. Tell 'em to bugger off. If some enemy ever comes sliding round here, pretending to know me, or pretending to *be* me, it's been known, they're tricky little sods, you see 'em off the property at the end of a fowling piece."

"Enemy?" said Jimbo, confused. "What sort of enemy would that be, Loopy?"

"Been in some strange spots, done some odd things for the Old Country. You can't do that without running across some touchy sorts, easily vexed, some of them. Quite possible some of them might pop round to do me down and do the Old Country down. If they do, see 'em off, Jimbo, there's a good man."

"Right," said Jimbo, more confused than ever, but willing to help a chum out. "Right, old chap."

He slept in one of the spare rooms that night. The thought of sleeping in the master bedroom gave him the ab-dabs. He had an uncomfortable night. The sheets were cold and a little damp, and thoughts swirled around in his head until in the early hours they began to swirl round like water going down a plughole and the simple soldier slept.

When he rose the next morning, the house was deserted. There was no sign of Loopy. And he wondered distractedly why there was no sign or sound of the Mem until the memories of the previous night swept over him.

He made some tea and ate some toast in the kitchen without enthusiasm. He wandered upstairs to get dressed, entering the large bedroom with trepidation. He found, as he opened the wardrobe, that all the Mem's clothes had disappeared. Her half was a void jangling with empty clothes hangers.

"All the Mem's frocks," he said, "gone, every last one. Rum do, that." And when he later patrolled the house, he found that everything of the Mem's had gone. Everything. All her bits and pieces from the dressing table and the bathroom. Even her Morris had

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gone from the garage, he realised when he went out to get some air.

He went to find Loopy, but found that the door to the Blue Room had acquired the largest padlock Jimbo had ever seen. The door was also now decorated with a metal plate, apparently the property of *Electricité de France,* which told him to *Défense d'Entrer.* He did exactly as he was told.

Loopy did not reappear for three days. But when he walked up the drive at three o'clock in the afternoon and let himself into the house, he found Jimbo still in dressing-gown and pyjamas sitting in an armchair. He had a heavy beard and his hair was dishevelled.

Loopy said, "I say, ol' man, we've let ourselves go a bit, haven't we?" He had abandoned the green suit in favour of a three-piece in natty maroon. He was also sporting a new watch that looked like a gold donut and his tie was secured by a pin with a horse's head on it. The trilby was still present.

Jimbo *had* let himself go a bit. He'd had an absolutely rotten three days, wandering about the house, pacing the empty rooms with no one to talk to except himself, which he had begun to do quite a lot and quite early on. He had also had a horrible shock. A postcard had arrived, that very morning, bearing a sunny picture of Weston-super-Mare. The writing on the card, which was difficult to read in places since it had been smudged by a circular mark, perhaps from a wet glass, read: "Dear Jimbo, I have run away from you to Join A Sect. Do not try to find me or it will be the Worse for you. They have given me the Love you have always Denyed me you rotten bastard. Do Not Try To Find Me. All my Love, Hetty Garside (The Mem). PS. Give my best to old Loopy who is a rough diamond but a good sort."

As Jimbo read this, his brain was trying to climb up the inside of his skull. What in the world could this mean? The Mem didn't *know* anybody in Weston-super-Mare. What's more, she couldn't stand the place. And what sort of sect could you find anyway in Weston-super-Mare? He had spent the rest of the day in a confused half-trance.

He now showed the postcard to Loopy, who looked it over, and then looked at him.

"Well, that sort of puts the lid on it, doesn't it, ol' man?" said Loopy. "Enough there to satisfy any peeping prying bastards who come sniffing around. I'd say you're in the clear, ol' man."

Jimbo nodded and stared at the card again, shaking his head.

"It's just a bit of a shock, Loopy, that's all. I mean, Weston-super-Mare of all places."

Loopy considered him for a long moment.

"Yes," he said slowly, "well, there's no accounting for tastes, is there? As the bishop said to the actress. Now, I think it's off to the ablutions with you, Jimbo. Can't have you lounging about idle on

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parade like this. Meantime, I'll knock together a good helping of Stromboli. That'll put the lead back in yer pencil. Yer need feeding up a bit."

Jimbo looked at his face in the bathroom mirror. He did need feeding up a bit, he thought. His cheeks had lost their former chubbiness, there were circles under his eyes, and his moustache had run riot. He would have to pull himself together. He would also have to do something about the rather worrying fits of involuntary, high-pitched laughter which had come on quite suddenly and inexplicably two days before. Just the very thought of these giggling fits brought on a fresh bout of cackling, until he spoke sharply to himself, regarded the other Jimbo sternly in the mirror, came to attention, and prepared to shave.

In the days that followed, life at Dar-es-Salaam settled down into an even if rather outlandish pattern. Jimbo found that life with Loopy rather suited him. Loopy did the cooking, consisting principally of variations on Stromboli and another equally sullen dish called Idi Amin's Revenge, while Jimbo went shopping for whatever vittles were needed and yet another case of Martell. Their evenings were spent cosily in the sitting room over a bottle of brandy, playing a card game that Loopy favoured called Dead Rats, which was played with three and a half decks of cards and had Byzantine rules that Jimbo never fully understood, which cost him dear.

They were, Jimbo often thought, like any other old couple. Except, of course, for the odd occasion when Jimbo fell to giggling and had to be slapped out of it. But they accommodated these little upsets.

"Goo' night, ol' man," Loopy would say at the end of one of their evenings, weaving his way up to the Blue Room.

"Sleep well, Loopy," Jimbo would affectionately say, leaving him at the head of the stairs to head for the master bedroom, quietly burping Stromboli and musing that he didn't know what he'd have done without dear old Loopy to help him through the dark days following the Mem's sudden departure. Weston-super-Mare. Of all places.

Several days later, Jimbo came back from town and a lunch with his broker at the Traveller's Club during which he had, over the steak and kidney, unaccountably fallen to shrieking with helpless laughter, while his mortified lunch partner tried his best to dematerialise and the other members and their guests eyed him nervously and tried to estimate the distance to the door.

Jimbo picked up the Rover in the station car park and drove into the village, intending to call on Dr. Caldicot to ask him if he could do something to stop this bloody giggling, but found that the

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surgery was closed. He discovered why when he entered his drive and saw first of all an old grey Austin blocking half the garage, and second of all, Loopy at the end of the garden.

Loopy advanced towards him. He was in shirtsleeves and very sweaty. He was carrying the Spear & Jackson shovel.

"Well, look what the cat's dragged in. I say, Jimbo," he said testily, as Jimbo climbed out of the car, "you might tell a chap when you're going to be late back to camp. I've had a hell of a time all by myself. You might think of other people a bit, you know. Bloody selfish, I call it."

Jimbo was mortified. "Loopy," he said, "I'm terribly sorry. I had no idea."

"Well, now you're here, you can come and help me finish off." Loopy led Jimbo to the orchard, where Jimbo saw two new patches of freshly turned earth.

"Just have to put back the turf, that's all. Not too much to ask, I hope?" said Loopy with heavy sarcasm.

Jimbo stared at the patches of earth.

"No, of course not. But Loopy, what on earth . . . ?"

"You might well ask, ol' man. Only somebody pretending to be the brother of Old Mother Whipple, accompanied by somebody making himself out to be a local doctor."

"I didn't know Mrs. Whipple had a brother."

"Almost certainly doesn't. This blighter had professional snooper written all over him. And the so-called doctor. No more a doctor than my left boot. Tried him with some simple questions about beriberi and yellow jack and he was floundering. Patent imposture. They gave me a lot of old toffee about the old Whipple not having turned up for a bit and not having taken her medicine. But I saw through them. The whole thing was laughable. Talk about your transparent tissue of lies. Make a cat laugh."

"Good Lord," said Jimbo, "so what happened?"

"When they started getting violent I had to calm them down slightly."

"God, Loopy, you don't mean—"

"Well, perhaps I overdid it a bit. But what the hell can you do when two bruisers force their way into your home unasked and start to beat you up?"

The idea of Dr. Caldicot, who was a frail seventy-two, paper-thin and myopic, as a *bruiser* interested Jimbo. There must have been more to the old boy than people made out.

"Good Lord," he said, "what on earth can have possessed him?"

"Beats me," said Loopy. "Now can we get this turf back down? I hate muddle and mess."

When Jimbo put the Rover in the garage, he peered into the so-called doctor's car, and saw that there was a so-called doctor's bag

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on the passenger seat. Here's a turn-up, he thought, it's an ill wind. There was bound to be something here. He opened the bag. In it there were many containers of tablets of all sorts and sizes. There was no pill box marked specifically Just the Job for the Giggles, as he was hoping there might be, but that night he took what seemed to him to be a reasonable handful of different colours and persuasions with his last swig of brandy.

The next seventy-two hours was a strange and drifting twilight time during which he lay in bed, half sleeping, half not, dazed by the play of coloured lights in the air around his bed and with an incessant carillon in his ears. There were also hallucinations. He awoke several times to hear what seemed to be raised voices, and a repeated, metallic clanging. And at one point, with his mouth full of cotton, he rose, went down to the kitchen, and poured a glass of water. Through the kitchen window, he could see, reflecting redly either the sunrise or the sunset, a police car. He smiled knowingly, finished the water, curled up on the kitchen floor in his pyjamas, and went to sleep.

He was woken on the third day by bright daylight, the sun streaming through the windows. He climbed slowly and painfully to his feet and hobbled out of the kitchen door in bare feet. The police car *must* have been a hallucination, because it had gone. But Loopy was there, in the sunlit orchard, digging at the bottom of a new trench right next to the Mem. Well, no, not next to the Mem, was it, because the Mem was in Weston. Well, no, she was here, but—not really here. Jimbo's mind tried to split in two as it did when he tried to tackle these thoughts.

Jimbo said, "Morning, Loopy. I say, what day is it?"

Loopy stopped digging, leaned on the spade, and squinted up at Jimbo. "Defaulters' Parade," he said. "Caps off, face front. Welcome back the Sleeping Beauty. I must say, Jimbo, you disappoint me a bit." He was stripped to the waist but wearing the ever-present trilby. Jimbo wondered vaguely, given this baking heat and the trilby's BacoFoil lining, what the temperature inside Loopy's skull might be.

"Why's that then, Loopy?" Jimbo looked about him. There seemed to be more patches of replaced turf scattered around between the Ribstones and the Cox's Orange than he remembered. He counted eight, eventually, because he lost count twice and had to start all over again.

"I say, I thought I saw a police car last night. Or was it the night before?" said Jimbo.

"Oh yes," said Loopy, "it's been come one, come all here while you were snoring like a pig and while I was trying to handle everything alone. All alone without a friend to help me." He looked around him in the hole he had dug. "I think that'll do. Give me a

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hand out, will you?"

Jimbo helped him out of the hole.

"Who are all these?" he said, waving a hand at the fresh patches.

"Assorted sniffers and snoopers," said Loopy.

"Speaking as a friend," Jimbo said, picking his way carefully through the confused contents of his head, "I think you may have to slow down a bit, ol' man."

"Now look, Jimbo," said Loopy, "I hope you're not implying that I'm one of those whatchermacallits—*serious* killers. Just happened to have a bit of an imbroglio with intruders, is all. Could happen to anyone. Lucky I happened to be here. You'd have been murdered in yer bed, in yer regimental pyjamas."

"But Loopy," Jimbo began.

"See here, ol' man, you're starting to irritate me. It's beginning to sound to me like you're on their side." Loopy appeared het-up. He stumped off through the trees, giving each of the fresh mounds a clout with the shovel. "Look at 'em and tell me if you ever saw the like. Spies and snoopers every one. And obviously all in cahoots." *Bang.* "Person from the parish council, *apparently.* Saw through him straight off." *Bang.* "Copper, or said he was a copper. Believe that, you'll believe anything."

Oh Lord. Sergeant Bosworth, Jimbo thought woozily.

Bang. "So-called friend of the so-called Whipple family." *Bang.* "So-called secretary of *soi-disant* doctor. See what you're up against, Jimbo? A gang of snoopers and spies out to get you no matter what. They're everywhere, Jimbo. They eavesdrop through the fireplaces and they send secret messages through the electric, as you'd know if you listened carefully to your fridge at night. And then they come creeping around *pretending* to be people. The good news is that the used-car market's picked up quite a bit recently."

"Who's this one for, Loopy?" asked Jimbo. He was standing on the edge of the hole.

"Ah," said Loopy craftily, tapping the side of his nose, "that's the question, isn't it? In any case, it's no use leaving things till the last minute. If there's one thing I learned at staff college, it's that."

"I can see that," said Jimbo mildly, "but really and truly, old chap, you might have to think about easing up a little."

He turned and looked down into the new hole.

"With you, Jimbo, I thought I had found sanctuary," said Loopy, behind him, "but now it turns out you were in league with *them* all along."

Jolly fine hole, Jimbo thought, the sides and edges all square and straight.

"Must say, very neat work, Loopy," he said, and turned to find that Loopy was galloping towards him through the orchard, clearly trying to swat a bothersome wasp with the upraised

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shovel. Jimbo stepped sideways to give him room to work, but Loopy continued to head straight towards him.

"I say," said Jimbo, "you ought to be a bit—" He never finished the sentence. The toe of Loopy's boot caught in a loose square of the Mem's turf, which had come unaccountably dislodged. His run continued, but now there was more stumble content. He stopped dead at the edge of the new hole, clearly thinking about jumping it to use up his momentum, but it was too late, his upper body was already on the way. He looked briefly at Jimbo with intense irritation, said, "Dammit," then fell across the hole at attention, still holding the shovel at port-arms, until he was stopped by his chin hitting the far side. There was a dull, very final-sounding crack. He hung there in a perfect curve like a suspension bridge, the insteps of his boots on one side of the hole and his chin on the other. His arms hung down below him, his hands still clenched on the shovel.

Oh Lord.

Jimbo walked round to look him in the face. Loopy's eyes were open, and Jimbo saw that the strangest thing had happened.

"I say, your squint's gone, Loopy ol' man," he said. And it was true, Loopy's eyes were now as straight as anybody's. They were staring past Jimbo's shoulder out of the Here into the Somewhere Else.

"Well, this is a facer," said Jimbo. "Poor old Loopy. Came to pay your last respects and stayed to share them."

He sat for a while on the side of the hole next to Loopy, humming and swinging his legs and musing on nothing in particular. When he next looked about him it was dark and seemed to have been for some time.

"This is no good," he said to Loopy, "have to get this squared away."

He went up to the house to find the Tilley lamp. And then he went up to the Blue Room and collected Loopy's suitcase. He did not open it. One did not rummage through another chap's doings, after all. Back at the hole, he had to climb down inside to retrieve the shovel from Loopy's deathly grip.

Once out, Jimbo went round to Loopy's feet side. He was careful to stamp down the turf on the Mem's hole, because it was clear you still had to watch yourself when she was around. Well, no, she wasn't around, was she? She was in Weston. He waved a mental hand at the flies that filled his brain, gripped Loopy firmly by the ankles, and pulled. Loopy's chin slipped from its hold and his upper body fell down towards the bottom of the hole, but Jimbo, with a soldier's instinct for these things, had been ready for this, and remained rock-steady. He hauled Loopy out and laid him out reverently.

"Well, Loopy, old comrade," he said, "this is the end of the trail.

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Last Post and Lights Out. Pay Parade on the other side. Now hold on tight, ol' man, this could be a mite bumpy."

He rolled Loopy into the hole and dropped the suitcase in beside him.

By the time he had finished filling it in, replacing the turf and patting it down to match, then scattering the unused earth around the orchard, the sun was well up, he was grimy, sweaty, and exhausted, and his pyjamas were a perfect disgrace. To cap it all, he found Loopy's trilby lying behind him on the ground, plain as anything. He sighed, picked it up, and trudged back to the house and into the kitchen. The kitchen clock said half-past eight.

"Good Lord," he said aloud, "look at that. Eight-thirty. Well, Jimbo, the sun's over the yardarm somewhere in the world." He chucked the trilby on the table and went to the sitting room to pour himself a large restorative snifter of brandy.

He sat down in an armchair, bone-weary, and raised his glass. Well, that was that.

"Here's to you, Loopy," he said to the empty air, "happy landings." And he drank deeply.

The doorbell rang.

"Oh Lord," he said to the sitting room, "why can't people leave other people in peace?"

He went to the door, glass in hand. He opened the door. There was a man standing on the top step. Jimbo stared at him. He was shortish and tubbyish, wearing a tweed suit. He had a plump face, moist blue eyes, and a neat moustache. Very much the sort of face, in fact, that Jimbo had owned until recently.

"Yah?" said Jimbo, suppressing a yawn.

"Jimbo!" said the man, beaming pinkly at him. "Jimbo, after all these years! Yer don't recognise me, do yer, you old bugger. It's me, old lad, Loopy, Loopy Drinkwater!"

"Right," said Jimbo, nodding. "Right. Come in."

"You're surprised to see me, can't say I blame yer. Thing is," said the man, entering and wiping his feet neatly, "we're in the neighbourhood, the wife and I, on a sort of painting holiday. We're both still very keen on the old watercolours and you've got some first-class countryside round here. We're putting up at the Blue Boar, the wife's settling herself in as we speak. I said to the little woman, tell you what, I said, I'll kill two birds with one stone and pop round and say hello to old Jimbo. Righto, she said, and here I am."

He looked closely at Jimbo, at the muddied pyjamas and the filthy bare feet.

"Looking a bit seedy, old lad, if you don't mind me saying so." He peered at the glass in Jimbo's hand and sniffed at it. "Aha. Naughty." He wagged a finger roguishly. "Drinking spirits in the

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mornin'. I see it all. The better half's away, I can tell, and you've let yerself run to seed a bit. Done the same myself many a time and oft. And from the look of yer she's been away some time."

"Weston-super-Mare," said Jimbo hoarsely. "Got a postcard. Nice postcard."

"Weston-super-Mare? Fine place. Well, if she comes home without warning, you'll get what for. She'll be wanting to see you clean, bright, and lightly oiled. Come on, old lad, let's get you sorted out. Where's yer kitchen? Through here, unless my instincts have deserted me." And he bustled off down the hall at a smart clip. Jimbo followed him more slowly.

"Good God," said the other, in the kitchen. Jimbo looked around. He supposed it was in a bit of a state. There were, it was true, many flies, mainly concerning themselves with the immense pile of dirty plates in the sink, and the blackened Stromboli pan on the stove.

"Phew! Let a bit of air in, I think, don't you?" The man opened the door, and looked out.

"By Jove, damn fine orchard you've got there, Jimbo, I must say." His face was wreathed in a pleased smile. "In fact, you got a damn nice billet all round. Lovely little village. Not a soul about. Lovely and quiet, just the way we like it. Almost deserted, this morning."

Jimbo stared at him for a moment. He opened his mouth. The other man stood about three seconds of the sounds that were coming in his direction, and then backed away. Just a little.

"Look, old lad," he said, fitting his words in carefully whenever Jimbo had to take a breath, "I think I'll take a turn around the garden. Perhaps you might freshen up a bit, change out of those pijjies that have seen better days, and then we can have a little chat and clean the place up a bit. How'd that be?"

Without waiting for an answer, he stepped out into the garden and walked down to the orchard. Jimbo finished off with thirty seconds of racking whoops and thigh-pounding, and sat down heavily at the kitchen table. He finished his glass of brandy with a gulp, staring at the door, his heart beating with the excitement of it all. His brain was in Spin Cycle.

This was the very thing Loopy had warned him about. Loopy had said this would happen. Loopy had said that one day an Enemy would come with false testimony, trying to do down Loopy and the Old Country. And here he was. What rotten luck, the very day after Loopy had been unavoidably called away.

He stood and went to the door and watched the tubby figure pacing about in the orchard, kicking at the newly laid turf. He had all the hallmarks of a practised snooper. And there were more of them. He had a so-called wife down at the Blue Boar. A *snooperess!* Well, that was all right. He could handle that. And he wouldn't

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be surprised at all if they were both in cahoots with the landlord at the Blue Boar and *his* wife, who were both known spies and eavesdroppers. Well, he could deal with them, too. And any other henchmen or henchwomen who happened to be about.

Tragically, Loopy had been obliged to let fall the torch for urgent personal reasons, but he, Jimbo, would snatch it up and carry it ever forward. The call had come and whenever the call had come in the past, Jimbo Garside had never been found wanting. He would not be found wanting now.

He picked up Loopy's trilby from the table and put it on. It was a little small but snug enough. Actually, old Loopy might have been on to something with this BacoFoil wheeze of his, because the ringing in his head seemed to diminish instantly. He stepped outside and picked up the faithful shovel from where it leaned against the kitchen wall, right there next to the spot where the Mem had plummeted from a ladder while heroically trying to save a cat.

And with the sound of muted carillons and trumpets in his ears, the simple soldier hitched up his pyjamas, shouldered arms, and walked into the orchard, to begin doing his duty for the Old Country and for Loopy Drinkwater, the best chum a chap could ever wish to have. ●

"You'll hear from my lawyer, pal!"

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Sneeze for Danger

by Val McDermid

I shifted in my canvas chair, trying to get uncomfortable. The hardest thing about listening to somebody sleeping is staying awake yourself. Mind you, there wasn't much to hear. Greg Thomas was never going to get complaints from his girlfriends about his snoring. I'd come on stakeout duty at midnight, and all I'd heard was the tinny tail end of some American sports commentary on the TV, the flushing of a toilet, and a few grunts that I took to be him getting comfortable in the big bed that dominated his extravagantly stylish studio penthouse.

I knew about the bed and the expensive style because we also had video surveillance inside Thomas's flat. Well, we'd had it till the previous afternoon. According to Jimmy Lister, who shared the day shift, Thomas had stopped in at the florist's on his way back from a meet with one of his dealers and emerged with two big bunches of lilies. Back at the flat, he'd stuffed them into a vase and placed them right in front of the wee fibre-optic camera. Almost as if he knew.

But of course, he couldn't have known. If he'd had any inkling that we were watching, it wouldn't have been business as usual in the Greg Thomas drugs empire. He wouldn't have gone near his network of middlemen, and he certainly wouldn't have been calling his partner in crime to discuss her forthcoming trip to Curacao. If he'd known we were watching him, he'd have assumed we were trying to close him down and he'd have been living the blameless life.

He'd have been wrong. I'm not that sort of cop. That's not to say

Val McDermid's name has appeared on numerous awards lists over the past few years. In 2004, her novel *The Distant Echo* (St. Martin's Minotaur) won both *Sherlock* magazine's award for best novel (unique among mystery awards in that it goes to the fictional detective, not the author) and the Barry Award, sponsored by *Deadly Pleasures* magazine. The author's many fans will be happy to know that her new book, *The Torment of Others*, will soon be out.

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I don't think people like Greg Thomas should be put away for a very long time. They should. They are responsible for a disproportionate amount of human misery, and they don't deserve to be living the high life. Thomas's cupidity played on others' stupidity, but that didn't make any of it all right.

Nevertheless, my interest was not in making a case against Thomas. What mattered to me was the reason nobody else had been able to do just that. Three times the Drugs Squad had initiated operations against Greg Thomas's multimillion-pound business, and three times they'd come away empty-handed. There was only one possible conclusion. Somebody on the inside was taking Thomas's shilling.

Samuels, who runs the Drugs Squad, had finally conceded he wasn't going to put Greg Thomas away until he'd put his own house in order. And that's where we came in.

Nobody loves us. Our fellow cops call us the Scaffies. That's Scots for "bin men." My brother, who studied Scottish literature at university, says it's probably a corruption of scavengers. Me, I prefer to knock off the first two letters. Avengers, that's what we are. We're there to avenge the punters who pay our wages and get robbed of justice because some cops see get-rich-quick opportunities where the rest of us see the chance to make a collar.

It's easy to be cynical in my line of work. When your job is to sniff out corruption, it's hard to see past that. It's difficult to hang on to the missionary zeal when you're constantly exposed to the venality of your fellow man. I've seen cops selling their mates down the river for the price of a package holiday. Sometimes I almost believe that some of them do it for the same reason as criminals commit crimes—because they can. And they're the ones who are most affronted when we sit them down and confront them with what they've done.

So. Nobody loves us. But what's worse is that doing this job for any length of time provokes a kind of emotional reversal. It's almost impossible for us Scaffies to love anybody. Mistrust becomes a habit, and nothing will poison a relationship faster than that. In the end, all you've got is your team. There's eight of us, and we're closer than most marriages. We're a detective inspector, two sergeants, and five constables. But rank matters less here than anywhere else in the force. We need to believe in each other, and that's the bottom line.

Movement in the street below caught my attention. A shambling figure, staggering slightly, making his way down the pavement opposite our vantage point. I nudged my partner Dennis, who rolled his shoulders as he leaned forward, focussed the camera, and snapped off a couple of shots. Not that they'd be any use. The three A.M. drunk was dressed for the weather, the collar of his

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Puffa jacket close round his neck and his baseball cap pulled down low. He stopped outside Thomas's building and keyed the entry code into the door. There were sixteen flats in the block and we knew most of the residents by sight. I didn't recognise this guy, though.

Through the glass frontage of the building opposite, we could see him weaving his way to the lift. He hit the call button and practically fell inside when the doors opened. I was fully alert now. Not because I thought anything untoward was going down, but because anything that gets the adrenaline going in middle-of-the-night surveillance is welcome. The lift stopped on the second floor, and the drunk lurched out into the lobby, turning to his left and heading for one of the flats at the rear of the building. We relaxed and settled back into our chairs. Dennis, my partner, snorted. "I wouldn't like to be inside his head in the morning," he said.

I reached down and pulled a thermos of coffee out of my bag. "You want some?"

Dennis shook his head. "I'll stick to the Diet Coke," he said.

It was about fifteen minutes later that we heard it. Our headphones exploded into life with a volley of sneezing. I nearly fell out of my chair. The volume was deafening. It seemed to go on forever. A choking, spluttering, gasping fit that I thought would never end. Then, as suddenly as it had started, it ended. I looked at Dennis. "What the hell was that?"

He shrugged. "Guy's coming down with a cold?"

"Out of the blue? Just like that?"

"Maybe he decided to have a wee taste of his own product."

"Oh aye, right. You wake up in the night, you can't get back to sleep, so you do a line of coke?"

Dennis laughed. "Right enough," he said. We left it at that. After all, there's nothing inherently suspicious about somebody having a sneezing fit in the middle of the night. Unless, of course, they never wake up.

I was spark out myself when Greg Thomas made his presence felt again. Groggy with tiredness, I reached for the phone, registering the time on my bedside clock. Just after one o'clock. I'd been in bed for less than four hours. I'd barely grunted a greeting when a familiar voice battered my eardrum.

"What the hell were you doing last night?" Detective Inspector Phil Barclay demanded.

"Listening in, boss," I said. "With Dennis. Like I was supposed to be. Why?"

"Because while you were listening in, somebody cut Greg Thomas's throat."

On my way to the scene, I called Jimmy Lister and tried to piece together what had happened. When the day shift hadn't heard a

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peep out of Thomas by noon, they'd grown suspicious. They began to wonder if he'd somehow done a runner. So they'd got the management company to let them into Thomas's flat and they'd found him sprawled across his bed, throat gaping like some monstrous grin.

By the time I got to the flat, there was a huddle of people on the landing. Drugs Squad, Serious Crime guys, and, of course, the Scaffies. Phil Barclay was at the centre of the group. "There you are, Chrissie," he said. "So how the hell did you miss a murder while you were staking out the victim?" For Phil to turn on one of his own in front of other cops was unheard of. I knew I was in for a very rough ride.

Before I could answer, Dennis emerged from the stairwell. "Listen to the tapes, boss," he said. "Then you'll hear everything *we* did. Which is nothing."

"Except for the sneezing," I said slowly.

All the eyes were on me now. "About twenty past three. Somebody had a sneezing fit. It must have lasted a couple of minutes at least." I looked at Dennis, who nodded in confirmation.

"We assumed it was Thomas," he said.

"That would fit," one of the other cops said. I didn't know his name, but I knew he was from Serious Crime. "The pathologist estimates time of death between two and five A.M."

Samuels from the Drugs Squad stuck his head out of the flat. "Phil, do you want to take a look inside, see if anything's out of place from when you had the video running?"

Barclay looked momentarily uncomfortable. "Chrissie, you and Dennis take a look. I didn't really pay much attention to the video footage."

"Talk about distancing yourself," Dennis muttered as we entered the flat, sidestepping a SOCO who was examining the lock on the door through a jeweller's loupe.

I paused and said, "Key or picks?"

The SOCO looked up. "Picks, I'd say. Fresh scratches on the tumblers."

"He must have been bloody good," I said. "We never heard a thing."

Greg Thomas wasn't a pretty sight. I was supposed to be looking round the flat, but my eyes were constantly drawn back to the bed. "How come we never heard it? You'd think he'd have made some sort of noise."

One of the technicians looked up from the surface he was dusting for prints. "The doc said it must have been an incredibly sharp blade. Went through right to the spine, knife through butter. He maybe would have made a wee gurgle, but that's all."

At first glance, nothing in the flat looked different. I stepped

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round the bed towards the alcove where Thomas had his work station. "His laptop's gone," I said, pointing to the cable lying disconnected on the desk.

"Great. So now we know we're looking for a killer with a laptop," Dennis said. "That'll narrow it down."

Back on the landing, Phil told us abruptly to head back to base. "We'll have a debrief in an hour," he said. "The Drugs Squad guys can run us through Thomas's known associates and enemies. Maybe they'll recognise somebody from our surveillance."

I walked back to my car, turning everything over in my head. The timing stuck in my throat. It felt like an uncomfortable coincidence that Greg Thomas had been killed the very night we'd lost our video cover. I knew Phil Barclay and Samuels were tight from way back and wondered whether my boss had mentioned the problem to Samuels. If the mole knew we were watching, he might have decided the best way to avoid detection was to silence his paymaster for good. That would also explain the silence. None of Thomas's rivals could have known about the need to keep the noise levels down.

Slowly, an idea began to form in my head. We might have lost the direct route to the Drugs Squad's bad apple, but maybe there was still an indirect passage to the truth. I made a wee detour on the way back to the office, wondering at my own temerity for even daring to think the way I was.

The debrief was the usual mixture of knowledge and speculation, but because there were three separate teams involved, the atmosphere was edgy. The DI from the Serious Crime Squad told us to assume our unidentified drunk was the killer. He hadn't been heading for a flat, he'd been making for the back stairs. Apparently the lock on the door leading to the penthouse floor showed signs of having been forced. He'd probably left by the same route, using the fire door at the rear of the building. He showed our pix on the big screen, but not even the guy's mother could have identified him from that. "And that is all we know so far," he said.

The silhouette I'd been expecting finally showed up outside the frosted glass door of the briefing room. I put up my hand. "Not quite all, sir," I said. "We also know he's allergic to lily pollen."

As I spoke, the door opened and the desk officer walked in, looking sheepish behind a big bouquet of stargazer lilies. The fragrance spread out in an arc before him as he walked towards Samuels. "I was told these were urgent," he said apologetically.

I held my breath, my eyes nailed to the astonished faces of Samuels and his cohort of Drugs Squad detectives.

And that's when Phil Barclay shattered the stunned silence with a fusillade of sneezes. ●

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Road Hazard

by David Dean

"If there is a theme to this story," author David Dean told *EQMM*, "it is the difference betwixt justice and reckoning, and how one can so closely resemble the other." The situation his protagonist confronts is one many readers will be familiar with, even if not to so devastating an extreme: the need to deal with a socially disruptive neighbor. Mr. Dean is a police captain in a New Jersey resort town, and he's chosen to make his lead character this time someone from the police. ¶

Rueben had lived in the same house for twelve years and held the same job for two more and considered himself a steady man and a good neighbor, or at least an undemanding one. When, he asked himself angrily on his drive home, had he offended anyone? In what way? Why did he now have to dread returning to his own neighborhood each night after work? When had the comfort of his routine and the blessed placidity of his solitary existence become so threatened?

These were not new questions that Rueben grappled with and, in fact, were rhetorical in nature: a mantra of dissatisfaction, unease, and frustration that was recited nightly on his long way home from the police department where he was employed. Rueben already knew the answers to the why and when of his questions; the agony lay in the what-to-do.

He was a good, even exceptionally good, dispatcher—an important, if unglamorous, profession; the first voice that the frightened, desperate, and irate heard when they dialed for help. When he'd had a few too many at the annual Christmas party, he was often heard to remark proudly, if a little resentfully, that without him (meaning all dispatchers, presumably) help would never arrive. There were few desperate situations that his disembodied voice had not been a party to, and yet, unlike the officers that he sent to the scene, he had never experienced the actual blood, vomit, and tears of unruly life, and in truth, he was glad.

Rueben contemplated the idea (for at least the hundredth time) of asking one of these officers to pay his neighbor a visit and, as

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always, dismissed the thought. The officers would see it for what it really was: a strong-arm demonstration, shady and gangsterlike, and would refuse. Worse, they would view him with contempt for not being man enough to do his own dirty work. Rueben squirmed at the thought as a sudden gust of wind shoved his car toward the center line.

An oncoming pair of headlights appeared suddenly from around a curve and began to flash high beams in an angry warning. Rueben twisted the wheel to the right, startled from his reverie by an accompanying blast from the other driver's horn as the car flew by without slowing. Gravel played a metallic tattoo on the undercarriage of his ancient Ford as it rode onto the shoulder at too high a speed. "Sonofabitch," he muttered, twisting the wheel yet again and resuming the roadway. "Concentrate . . . concentrate."

The nightscape seemed to reflect his turmoil—wherever his headlights fell, movement and shadow grappled and receded. A small white branch shot out of the darkness and skittered across the windshield like a ghost crab; Rueben slowed the car.

Somewhere far ahead, just beyond the reaches of a lone street lamp, there was movement. At least, Rueben thought he saw movement, though he could see nothing now. Yet, there was something that had drawn his attention. Even now, like a ripple in a pond or a disturbance of the mist, there was the suggestion of something. Rueben strained his eyes in the gloom. Yes, there it was again, on his side of the street! Linear and purposeful . . . nothing out of nature, certainly, and moving right towards him. Rueben felt a drop of perspiration form beneath his heavy, long-out-of-fashion moustache. "What on earth," he breathed uneasily. Car and phantom closed on one another.

A figure began to form at the murky outer fringes of the headlamps: improbably tall and wobbly, a shifting dark kaleidoscope of flapping wings, limbs, and even tentacles, rushing headlong towards the car.

Then it arrived full-blown in the glare of the headlights: face, a rigid, unshaven mask of discomfort; eyes, squinted nearly shut behind dirty taped glasses that returned the car lamps' brilliance in miniature. The tattered old army overcoat that the man wore waved and flapped about him as he pumped along on the spindly, rusty bike, and his filthy scarf and hair whipped this way and that in the wild wind. He glared at Rueben through the windshield, though it was impossible that he could see in. Rueben feared that he might intentionally collide with the car; he followed the white shoulder line so closely. He rode as if to challenge the oncoming driver.

"You idiot!" Rueben screamed as he swerved to the left at the last moment and the apparition was swallowed up by the night.

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"You idiot," he repeated more softly, chancing a backwards glance and half expecting to see the hated cyclist following. He wiped each palm on his trouser legs as more beads of sweat popped out on his upper lip (the real reason he had never shaved the unfashionable face hair).

Him, Rueben fumed, unknowingly picking up speed. Was there no getting away from that demented lowlife? How had he ended up with such a neighbor? And to pop up just when he was thinking about him. What were the odds—out here; in the middle of the night?

It wasn't always so bad, he mused, steadily picking up speed as he narrowed down to the last few miles. No, it wasn't that bad before Curt died. Uncomfortable, yes. But now . . . intolerable.

If Rueben had been less distracted by his train of thought, he might have been forewarned by the events of his drive: the wind, the branch, the other car, even his hated neighbor—the wildness of the night seemed determined to drive all before it. Yet Rueben remained impervious, wrapped in his downward-spiraling thoughts, even as his foot grew ever heavier on the accelerator. The first deer had actually bounded in front of his car and vanished into the darkness of the other side of the road before his brain could signal his foot to brake. The fawn that followed was not so fortunate.

In the split second that it took for Rueben to react, he saw, or more accurately, perceived in a flash of tan and white and just the suggestion of a large, moist eye, the smaller animal attempt to make the same crossing as its mother. The sickening thud that followed was simultaneous with the scream of his tires attempting to grip the asphalt. The deerling was flung back in the direction from which it had sprung.

Rueben managed to stop the car on the shoulder of the road some fifty yards away and clambered out into a haze of burnt, stinking rubber that, incredibly, hung in the air like a fog. It was as if the hideous impact had silenced the very wind and the night world now watched with held breath. By the light of his remaining headlamp, Rueben examined the damage as best he could. Besides the lamp, he could see that the grille was smashed, and with a frisson of horror, that several tufts of fur were caught in it, but as no fluid appeared to be seeping from the car and the engine was apparently unaffected, he had only the tire to be concerned with. A long streak of blood led him to the wheel well. Cautiously, so as not to smear himself, he felt about until he was satisfied that the tire was not damaged or impeded by the crumpled quarter panel. Rueben stood and carefully inspected his palms, but saw only road dirt.

He stumbled along the roadside in the direction from which he

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had come, scanning this way and that for the injured animal, as small stones skittered from beneath his shoes. He prayed that it was not still alive and suffering, as he had no idea what to do in such a case and doubted that he had the nerve to put it out of its misery, if he did.

No nerve was required, however. Rueben found the small, broken body at the wood line, and even by the phosphorescent moonlight, it was obviously dead. He stared down at it from the edge of the lonely road and was struck with the enormity and finality of death, as evidenced by this tiny, frail, yet once vibrant creature. It already had the deflated look of the absence of life, and even the large, bright eye that he had glimpsed the second before collision was filmed and sticky-looking.

"You were goin' too fast."

Rueben uttered a small cry and took several steps backwards, almost losing his balance.

"*Way* too fast," the phlegm-choked voice challenged again from the darkness.

Rueben's dilated pupils were now able to make out the dim figure that stood like a statue in the greater darkness of a nearby oak. He could just discern the bicycle that the figure leaned on and that had brought him noiselessly to the scene. With a fresh outbreak of sweating on his upper lip and a slightly sick feeling in his stomach, Rueben acknowledged what he already knew—that his hated neighbor was now a witness to his crime against nature.

"I . . . I didn't see it until . . . well, it was too late," Rueben stammered as the figure detached itself from the moon shadow and approached, still wheeling the bicycle. "He just sprang out from the woods." Rueben hated the wheedling, defensive sound of his voice. Why did this man always elicit this kind of reaction from him? Of course, the fact that he was evidently some kind of demented night crawler might explain some of it, he thought angrily. What was he doing out at this time of night? It was after one in the morning.

"Her," the neighbor corrected, bending low over the carcass. Rueben had the impression that he might start feeding on the dead thing at any moment.

"It's a her . . . a female," the man repeated without looking up from his careful scrutiny.

With a shock of revulsion, Rueben realized that he had lifted the poor creature's tail to expose the hindquarters for his benefit.

"Yes, I see . . . a female," Rueben acknowledged uneasily.

Still squatting, he turned his face up to Rueben and smiled. This time it was the wan light of the moon that pooled in the grimy lenses of his skewed glasses, hiding the bloodshot piggish eyes that Rueben remembered so well. The same light delineated the

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face like a stark black-and-white portrait; each detail stood forth from the composite whole as unattractive in its own right, independent of the unpleasant picture they all conspired to create: the crown of the lumpy skull was nearly exposed, with only a few lank wisps trailing down to join the true hairline that began just above the large, furry ears. The rest had been allowed to grow to shoulder length and was so dirty that it looked like the hair of a drowned man—wet and twisted into greasy ropes by the currents. Dirty-looking stubble covered the drawn lower face, and Rueben briefly marveled at how someone could always be unshaven, yet never grow a beard. In the thousands of days that Rueben had watched his neighbor lounge about his property (no, his father's property, Rueben primly corrected himself), his appearance never changed. The hair, the stubble, the lank, wispy moustache that barely draped the long, thin upper lip, even the glasses always sported some homemade, amateurish repair. He was like some prehistoric insect trapped in amber, Rueben thought meanly—hideous and unchanging.

The face continued to grin up at Rueben as if awaiting an answer that would surely be wrong. Rueben stared back, unable to shift his gaze or just walk away, aware for the first time just how much the man frightened him and how closely that fear resembled hatred.

"That mighta been me," the neighbor observed as he stood. "Dead, like that." He nudged the carcass with the toe of his engineer boot to emphasize his point. "Almost was."

"You were on the wrong side of the street," Rueben squeaked, outraged and made nervous by the insinuation.

"I've been runned over before," he pronounced proudly, pointing to the left side of his face and turning his small, round head to best advantage in the moonlight.

Rueben was horrified to see a whorl of scar tissue at the man's left temple that appeared to extend into the eye socket. Face-on, with the glasses, it was almost hidden, but from the angle he presented, it appeared as if a spike had been driven into his head and wrested out many years before. Rueben could barely contain his disgust.

"My God," he whispered, "how did that . . . ?"

"Speeder . . . like you," the neighbor offered pleasantly, his tiny teeth an uneven row of mottled corn kernels. "Left me for dead." As an afterthought, he added, "But I wasn't."

For the first time in the twelve years that Rueben had gone from amused tolerance of the youngster who seemed unable to leave his father's nest to thinly disguised contempt for the surly abuser that ruled over his ageing parents like a tyrant, Rueben

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felt a spark of compassion. Was this injury the root cause of such repellent behavior?

"Danny," Rueben tried the name like a foreign word; he hadn't used it since Curtis, Danny's poor, broken father, had died. "When did this happen . . . your accident, I mean?" He gestured weakly at the scar.

Danny seemed startled at the use of his name, but quickly recovered. "Right about when you moved into the neighborhood." He stared into Rueben's eyes meaningfully and smiled.

Now it was Rueben's turn to be startled. "You're not insinuating that I . . ." He stopped, unwilling to complete the implied accusation. "You're not serious!"

Danny stopped smiling. "Mighta been you," he opined evenly. "It almost was you tonight."

"I was nowhere close to hitting you," Rueben protested, the sweat breaking out on his forehead now as well. "You were on the wrong side of the street!" Rueben thought to take the initiative. "Besides, what are you doing out here at this time of night, anyway? And with no lights or reflectors?" he asked as accusingly as he dared.

"Gimme ten dollars," Danny countered, taking a step closer.

"What?" Rueben was flummoxed by the sudden change in tack.

"Ten," Danny repeated firmly. "The Bealwood closes in half an hour."

The Bealwood was a local watering hole; not the kind of place Rueben patronized. "You want beer money?" Rueben gasped, taking a step back.

"Ten," Danny repeated and shot out a grimy, black-nailed hand. "Then we'll just keep this to ourselves."

"Keep what?" Rueben protested, even as he pulled out his wallet and extracted a five with shaking hands. He was disgusted and ashamed of his easy capitulation, but the nearness of this man, the smashed animal at his feet, and the eerie solitude of their situation all conspired to deprive him of what little courage he possessed.

Danny snatched the five from his grip and instantly returned his open palm for Rueben's inspection. "I said ten."

Humiliated, Rueben dug out several more bills to find another five, only to have Danny snatch the remainder from his grasp and crush them into a ball without even bothering to count. Incredibly, he smiled and slapped Rueben on the shoulder.

"Wanna come get a drink?" he inquired amiably.

Rueben shook his head weakly and looked at his feet to hide the tears that welled up in his eyes.

"Aw'right, then," Danny acquiesced cheerfully. "But I aw'ways shut the place down." With that, he climbed onto his shaky bicycle

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and grunted and puffed until he gained enough speed to glide away.

"I could have him arrested," Rueben told himself as he stared angrily after his antagonist, then just as quickly dismissed the idea. The additional humiliation of explaining to officers, people he saw on a daily basis, how he was robbed without a blow or a weapon was too much. He could easily imagine the sly exchanged glances and barely concealed smirks. No, he would tell no one. It would be unbearable.

Danny had been in his late teens when Rueben had bought the house just next-door, and even then, Rueben had sensed all was not well with his neighbors. Curtis and Dot were quiet, friendly folk who had made a point of welcoming Rueben to the neighborhood with an iced cinnamon cake baked by Dot herself. They had arrived at his door without their son, and never once mentioned him throughout their brief, chatty visit. Rueben might never have known he existed if not for his sullen, beer-drinking presence camped out for hours at a time in their backyard—ensconced in a lawn chair and glaring at Rueben whenever he ventured into his own. Apparently, he did not attend school, as Rueben (who had always worked the four-to-twelve shift) found to his dismay when he wished to enjoy his own yard. It was unsettling to be the subject of such intense and, seemingly, malevolent scrutiny, but Rueben kept his peace, not wishing to upset Curtis or Dot, who obviously bore a heavy, and what must have been disappointing, burden in their son. Rueben's attempts to break the ice with a friendly wave were ordinarily met with a toadlike stare, the occasional curt nod, and more than once, the "finger." If things had continued in this manner, Rueben might not have found himself standing on a lonely roadside twelve years later with a dead deer, an empty wallet, and, worse still, a gut-sick fear that was rapidly evolving into murderous hatred.

It was typical, if destructive, boyish pranks at first: a full garbage can left at the curb for pickup turned upside down, the lid vanished; impossible to right without emptying the entire stinking contents into the street. A carefully carved jack-o'-lantern smashed against the siding of the house, orange gore dripping and a stain that took great effort to wash away. A paper bag set aflame on his front step, which Rueben found, after stomping it out, to be full of excrement (he never cared to discover whether it was of animal or human origin). In every case, he could count on looking up and finding Danny watching impassively, a cigarette dangling from his lips.

Events grew more alarming, and not just for Rueben. It seemed no one was exempt, even if Rueben was especially singled out. One neighbor got a brick through the windshield of his brand-new

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automobile left proudly parked on the street. Another awoke to find his newly filled pool fouled in a manner reminiscent of Rueben's porch incident. There were accusations and recriminations, and even Rueben joined in after he awoke to find his front door spray-painted with the word "FAG" in bright yellow. It took several coats of enamel paint to conceal the epithet and Rueben noticed that several men in the neighborhood were cool to him afterwards.

Rueben was shocked at the appearance of Curtis and Dot when they warily answered his rings on this occasion. He had not seen them except at a distance for several years, so cool had relations become in the neighborhood as a result of their son's depredations, and he found them shrunken and timid—hollowed out with shame and something else . . . fear, Rueben thought. They looked ancient. He hadn't the heart to do anything other than ask them to keep an eye on Danny and beat a hasty, embarrassed retreat.

Danny was sitting on the front steps when he came out and Rueben gave him a terse nod. As he hurried past, a cigarette butt arced past his head like a tiny comet. He spun about to find Danny staring off into the middle distance, making perfect smoke rings.

Rueben's cat did not return home the following day. A week later, he found the old tom curled up on the patio with his head tucked neatly beneath his tail—frozen solid and slowly defrosting in the blazing summer sun. In the adjacent yard, Danny leaned from his rickety lawn chair and retrieved a cold beer from the refrigerator plugged into an outside outlet that he kept for his convenience, and with slow exaggeration, rolled the sweating can across his sloping brow. Rueben fled into the house, tears of shame and rage choking him in a slow, steady grip.

As Danny could and did roam at all hours (he never held a job, to Rueben's knowledge) and could, therefore, strike at will and without witnesses, the neighborhood simply hunkered down and tried not to gain his attention. Any complaint to the police resulted in inquiries at Danny's door, which had the unfortunate result of identifying the complainant. Retribution was sure to follow.

Sadly, it was the hapless Curtis and Dot who suffered the silent scorn and universal condemnation of the community. Though their abhorred son had long ago reached adulthood, it was they who were afforded the status of "non-persons": They were invited nowhere, spoken to only from necessity, and soundly, firmly, and pointedly ignored. The kindly middle-aged couple shrank from public scrutiny over time and were seen less and less often. Even as their closest neighbor, Rueben only caught glimpses of them as they ran the most necessary errands. *After all, the beast must be*

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fed, Rueben thought meanly, on more than one sighting. Yet he could see the toll taken on them. They looked more ill and frail than their years should have made them. Dot died the tenth year of Rueben's residency, of ovarian cancer, and Curtis followed a scant two years after from a heart attack.

Both funerals were surprisingly well attended, though Rueben suspected baser motives at work than the simple act of mourning might portray. He suspected because he recognized the cowardice at work in himself. But if the crowd expected a softening from the son in the face of their apparent grief, they were sorely disappointed. Danny simply sat at the foot of the coffins like a drugged, though still potentially dangerous, guard dog, and stared out over the uncomfortable gatherings as if he were in an empty room.

The neighborhood was also to be disappointed in yet another way. With Curtis's death, hope raised its head and happy speculation circulated from house to house. Surely, now, they would be released. The watch for the For Sale sign to appear was a happy and expectant one. It was not to be, however, for the truth eventually supplanted the rumors, and Danny was found to be the sole possessor of a mortgage-free home. If this was not disappointing enough, and infuriating for all those who would work thirty years to attain the same status, it also became known that he was the recipient of some mysterious source of income—not much, but enough to meet his basic needs. The neighborhood fell back in dismay and awaited the next blow.

Strangely, that blow had yet to fall, and this was almost worse than the campaign of depredations. The neighborhood and Rueben existed in a state of tension, an unbearable condition of expectation and dread: Like beaten dogs they seemed to scurry, not walk, always looking back to see who, or what, approached.

Danny's lassitude only made matters worse. His lizardlike posture on his front porch was ascribed to planning; his seemingly casual forays on his bike were interpreted as reconnaissance, and when lights were seen in the windows of his house in the small hours, it was understood to bode ill for someone.

All of these thoughts raced through Rueben's head as he stood at the edge of the road, the wind beginning to rise once more, as evidenced in a murmuring of dried leaves.

"Enough," Rueben hissed. "I don't deserve this! Who the hell does he think he is?" Rueben kicked the small, broken body that lay at his feet, and stepped back immediately with a stifled cry of horror and disgust at what he'd done. From across the street came an answering report of a snapped branch or twig, and Rueben spun about, fully expecting to find Danny returned—but saw only darkness. Breathlessly, he returned to his car, and hurriedly drove away with but one lamp left to light his progress.

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Rueben waited until the following morning to request an officer for an accident report. He reasoned that he would need it for insurance purposes, but as no one had been injured and it had not involved another vehicle, it could wait until after a night's rest. The officer, an affable fellow named Blaise, arrived at ten to find Rueben hollow-eyed and nervous after a fitful sleep, standing next to his car in the driveway.

"Mornin', Rube," Blaise huffed as he bent to examine the damage.

Rueben gritted his teeth in annoyance. Though the nickname was almost universally employed by the officers of the department, and Rueben had come to accept it over the years, it had a particularly demeaning ring this morning.

"Good morning, *Blaise,"* Rueben returned stiffly, overemphasizing the officer's unusual name.

Blaise glanced up at Rueben with a small smile. "Somebody cranky this mornin', Rube?"

Rueben exhaled noisily and tried a strained smile. "Yeah," he agreed. "I'm a little cranky. . . . I hit a deer last night. A baby deer," he added a little guiltily.

"What were you doin'? Drivin' drunk?" Blaise inquired pleasantly.

"No! Of course not. I just got off from work! You know that! I was just—"

"Whoa . . ." The officer held his hands up from his still-kneeling position. "Take 'er easy, Rube! I was just kiddin'. Maybe we *should* go out and knock back a few and shake the starch from your britches!" He chuckled.

Rueben put his hands to his head and massaged his temples. He *did* feel like he had a hangover. "Sorry, sorry," he sighed. "It was all just a little upsetting." Rueben glanced nervously at the house next-door, and for the briefest of moments considered telling the officer everything that had happened.

Blaise stood up, dusting his knees. "Well, the important thing is that you're okay, and the car ain't that bad, really. In any case, I'll have the report ready by tomorrow and you can pick it up at work. Where'd you say you left the deer? . . . I'll notify animal control to pick it up."

"What . . ." Rueben mumbled, his thoughts unaccountably jumbled, as if he were trying very hard to remember something. "Oh, yes, the deer."

After the officer left, Rueben placed a call to his insurance company and then to a garage on their approved list. He got the head mechanic after a half-dozen rings.

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"Yeah, sure, bring it in today. Things are kinda slow round here. We should be able to get to it over the next few days," he offered cheerfully.

Rueben couldn't believe his good timing; he had off the next two nights and wouldn't even have to make arrangements for a ride to work. "That's great . . ." he began, then trailed off. For the second time that morning he felt his thoughts intruded upon, as if something were moving beneath his consciousness, trying to rise from the gray depths into the light. He cleared his throat. "How about Friday? Could I bring it in then?" That would give him two nights.

"Sure," the mechanic replied in a puzzled tone. "But we might be busy by then. Could take longer."

"Well, that'll be fine," Rueben assured him. "Friday, then." And he hung up the phone.

What had lain hidden now burst forth: Bits and pieces of the previous night scrambled this way and that, glowing with import. Rueben stood stock-still and forced himself to examine each telling moment—Danny's halfhearted accusation, his inadvertent (or was it?) revelation that he always closed the Bealwood, and of course, the fawn. Was that just bad luck . . . or Providence? He could see it as clearly as if it were already done.

As Danny staggered from the bar, Rueben smoothly accelerated from the dim parking lot across the street and glanced at his watch. It read two A.M. "Right on time, Danny, just like you promised," he whispered excitedly.

Though he couldn't know exactly what route Danny might take home, Rueben was certain of one thing: The stretch of county blacktop where they had met on the previous night was unavoidable. It was the only link to their subdivision.

Rueben calculated that he had at least fifteen minutes before the drunken Danny could possibly arrive into what he now thought of as the "kill zone." Rueben's plan was simple: Drive up and down the road until Danny was spotted, then, if the coast was clear, run him down. The only real challenge, as Rueben saw it, was that the impact must occur where the car had suffered damage the night before. Not that hard, really, and Rueben felt equal to the challenge.

Since Danny insisted on being a traffic hazard and using the wrong side of the road, it would be a simple matter of swerving to the right at the last possible moment, at a high rate of speed, of course, and then just continuing on. If he happened to survive such a head-on impact, the headlamps would prevent him from identifying the vehicle. Even one headlamp, he felt certain, so long as it was set on high-beam. In any event, Rueben did not expect him to survive.

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The wait was not long. In far less than the fifteen minutes estimated by Rueben, he spotted the wobbling bicycle approaching. Even in the gray, hazy light provided by the occasional street lamp, Rueben's flapping, fluttering, scarecrowlike silhouette was unmistakable. Far from the terror it had inspired the previous night, this time Danny's presence was welcomed—Rueben felt positively elated, not a trace of nerves. In fact, as he began to accelerate, climbing steadily beyond the fifty-mile-per-hour limit, the sense of inevitability and, yes, invulnerability, that he had first felt grow warm during his conversation with the mechanic now positively blazed. He hit the high beams.

If there was such a thing as a God-appointed mission, then this surely was it, Rueben chuckled. Hadn't the hated, Caliban-like Danny suggested it himself, even to an appointed time and place? Danny knew what he truly deserved, and like the animal he was, should be put down. Was he any better than that poor little deer, beautiful and unoffending, whose only instinct had been to stay with its mother? The speedometer had passed the sixty-mile-per-hour mark and was still climbing.

Rueben was smiling broadly now, and for just a moment he envisioned himself being lofted onto the shoulders of his grateful neighbors, all shouting his name and praises for accomplishing that which another (and surely it was one of them) had failed to do. No, his feat, however heroic, must remain a secret. It would be enough, he assured himself, to simply gaze upon the relieved and happy faces of the newly liberated and know, with the quiet pride of the champion, that all this was his doing.

He leveled the car at sixty-five, not wishing to risk loss of control. Danny could be seen clearly, one arm raised against the intensity of the light bearing down on him. Rueben eased the speeding vehicle to the right, placing the passenger-side wheels onto the shoulder. Danny remained defiantly close to the shoulder line, waving the oncoming car away with imperious slaps at the air, which infuriated Rueben.

The car struck bike and rider with a metallic clack, and Rueben shouted out at the same moment with a loud "Hah!" The rest followed so rapidly and silently that he was unsure as to what had happened. He sensed, rather than saw, that something large and dark had sailed past the passenger side of his car at incredible speed and vanished into the darkness like a thought. That was it.

With only slight difficulty, largely because he was breathing so hard all of a sudden, he regained his lane and began slowing. Not a single other car was in sight. He reached an intersection a mile down the road and executed a careful U-turn. Within moments he was passing what he was sure was the very spot. There was nothing. The undergrowth by the side of the road had swallowed every-

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thing—man and bike. With a smile and the satisfying sense of a job well done, Rueben headed for home.

Since he had accomplished what he set out to do on the first night, Rueben now had the second to get through before he took the car to the body shop. After carefully inspecting his car in the security of his garage, he was pleased, though not so surprised really (he had somehow known it would be like this), to find almost no additional damage to his old Ford. The lamp housing was twisted even more to the outside of the car, but not alarmingly so; he doubted whether Blaise would note the difference even after having previously inspected it.

There was one unsettling moment, though, when he discovered a tuft of what was obviously human hair caught between that same housing and the front quarter-panel. With meticulous care and a gagging disgust, Rueben extracted it with tweezers and disposed of it down the toilet, vigorously washing his hands afterward.

There was surprisingly little blood. Besides the smear that had been left by the fawn, wine-colored droplets spread like a ruby constellation across the passenger side of the car. Warm water, soap, and a brush made short work of both.

Now, as night was upon him once more, Rueben found himself at the Bealwood Bar and Grill enjoying a cold beer. He felt flamboyant, though of course no one there could possibly know that he had slain one of their steady, and, he was sure, unwelcome customers. The day's paper had made no mention of a hit-and-run. Still, it felt deliciously dangerous, and Rueben thought he had never tasted such wonderful beer in his life. He was a little disappointed, though, that not one person in the bar remarked on Danny's absence.

After several more beers than was his usual, Rueben set out for home, retracing his victim's ride of the night before. Humming with the radio, he turned left onto the county road and began to accelerate.

Rueben saw the pulsing red lights reflecting off the trees before he rounded the curve, and for one gut-wrenching moment, considered braking and turning the car around. The chase car parked in the greater shadows to his right convinced him of the folly of that. Swallowing the beery, acidic gorge that rose burning into his throat, he slowed for the roadblock that the police had craftily engineered.

Two patrol cars facing opposite directions sat in the center of the road, the overheads rotating in a riot of red light. Beyond, a second chase car also crouched in the darkness, awaiting anyone from the opposite direction who might wish to avoid the police.

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Rueben came to a stop behind one other car, and watched as an officer (he couldn't tell who due to the glare) seemed to chat amiably with the driver. Rueben used the few moments' respite to collect himself.

No one saw anything, he reassured himself. They must have found the body sometime this afternoon, or evening, and conducted the autopsy. *That's why they're here now. They know the approximate time he died and this is just a routine roadblock to interview everyone who normally passes at this time. They don't* know *anything, otherwise they wouldn't be bothering with this.*

The officer waved the other car on and Rueben eased forward. Damn! He didn't recognize this kid! He must be a rookie. For Christ's sake! Of all the times to draw the wild card! He could see the kid's brow puckering up as he played his flashlight over the damage to Rueben's car. He shot his hand up, as if to say "far enough," and began walking the length of the passenger side, his head at a tilt.

A sudden wave of hilarity came over Rueben and he could barely contain a chuckle. "Look, kid. Look all you want," he whispered.

The young officer had worked his way entirely around the car and had now arrived at the driver's window. "Good evening, sir," he greeted Rueben curtly. "May I ask what happened with your car?"

Rueben didn't like the rookie's no-nonsense attitude and wasn't used to not being recognized by the officers—it unsettled him, made him feel like just another civilian, or worse, and his mood quickly evaporated. He tried to smile, but felt his cheek muscles twitching and let it drop.

"A deer," he replied just as curtly. "I hit a baby deer."

"A deer?" The young officer looked dubious, and his eyes drifted to the damaged headlamp.

"Yeah . . . a deer," Rueben repeated, beginning to enjoy the game, that overwhelming feeling of euphoria returning unbidden. "You know . . . Bambi." The smile arose naturally now and he could feel laughter bubbling dangerously close to the surface. He could see the kid didn't like it, but was powerless to stop it.

"And when did this happen, sir?" The rookie wasn't going to let it be.

"Night before last," Rueben replied laconically, the smile threatening to split his face. "There's a report. Blaise took it . . . Officer Lamanna, that is," Rueben added smugly.

The rookie seemed challenged by this and took a step back. "Wait here, sir," he directed, and marched off toward the other patrol car. Rueben placed a hand over his mouth to suppress the giggles.

Presently, he made out the boy, in the company of an older,

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larger officer, stumping back. He couldn't believe his luck (then again, yes he could): It was Blaise! Rueben was so pleased with the turn of events that he shouted out a greeting and slapped the veteran officer on the shoulder as he leaned down to the window.

"Rueben, what the hell are you doin' out, I'd a' thought you'd learned your lesson the other night," he joked. Then he took a sudden step back and began to fan the air in front of his face. "Whoa . . . so you did take my advice, huh?"

Rueben felt momentarily sheepish and grinned stupidly at Blaise. "I'm on my way home," he offered weakly.

The older officer leaned back in and grinned at him. "Listen, you're damn lucky I'm here—I switched shifts with Billy MacDougal as a favor, otherwise, this young lion," he tossed his head back at the now-sullen younger officer, "would be locking your ass up for DWI . . . pronto."

"I appreciate it, Blaise, I really do," Rueben gushed.

Blaise lowered his voice to a stage whisper and hooked his thumb over his shoulder. "Thought he caught a *killer* when you pulled up with all that damage."

In just the nick of time, Rueben remembered that nothing had been in the news. "What's this all about," he asked innocently, with a sweep of his hand indicating the roadblock.

"Hit-and-run, old son, hit-and-run. Some son of a bitch run down a bicyclist and left him for the flies. Hell of a thing," Blaise intoned soberly. "Hell of a thing." He paused dramatically. "In fact, you oughta know 'im. He was a next-door neighbor of yours, if I'm not mistaken."

Rueben's mouth had gone suddenly cottony and dry. "You're kidding . . . who?"

"A scruffy-looking character name of York . . . Danny York. Know 'im?"

"Yeah, of course I do. That's a shame." Rueben did his best to sound sincere.

"Yeah . . . well, since I'm here, let me do a walk-around to satisfy the rookie," Blaise announced, and began to walk in front of the car playing his flashlight along its surface.

Rueben almost protested, but stopped short. He felt the eyes of the rookie watching his face. It didn't matter, he reassured himself, it didn't matter.

Blaise sauntered along, reaching the far side of the car and beginning to work his way to the rear. He stopped almost opposite Rueben and appeared to be studying something. Rueben felt his breathing get shallow and rapid. What was he looking at? What could he possibly have missed?

Blaise tapped suddenly on the passenger window and indicated that Rueben should roll it down. Rueben leaned over and noticed

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that his hand was shaking as he worked the crank. He prayed Blaise couldn't see it.

"What happened to your mirror, here?" The officer tapped the outside rearview and it spun uselessly on its axis. "I don't remember this, Rueben."

Rueben shrugged, unable to speak for a moment; he had no idea what his expression must be. "It was there, Blaise," he lied as steadily as he could. "The day you came over, it was that way." For the life of him, Rueben couldn't think how he could have missed it. Danny's bike, or body, must have struck it and broke the retaining screws, and yet, it somehow remained in place. Hell, rust must have held it in place for a little longer! For all he knew, it came dislodged when he ran over a pebble a quarter-mile back!

Blaise glanced guiltily past Rueben to the young officer waiting and whispered, "Hell, you think I just missed it?" He paused again, his seamed face a mask of concentration. "Wouldn't surprise me," he exhaled, at last. "I'm not a young buck like that one." He nodded at the rookie. "Well, straight home, Rueben, I mean it, okay?"

"Okay, Blaise," he answered quietly, though he wanted to shout to the skies.

With a quick glance of contempt at the younger officer, Rueben put his car in gear. "Seat belt," the rookie snapped and pointed at his chest. Rueben ignored him and drove away.

As soon as he was out of sight of the roadblock he pressed the accelerator to the floor and began to howl and bang the roof with his fist. "I knew it," he shouted over the cool wind whistling through the open window. "I knew it! There is a God. . . . There is justice! The meek shall inherit the . . . sonofabitch!"

The deer seemed to be waiting: standing in his lane as he rounded the curve and gazing calmly at his oncoming vehicle. For Rueben, everything slowed down inside his head: He watched as his hands seized the wheel and incredibly, wrongly, wrenched it hard to the right. It was instinct to avoid something in the road, but it was such a mistake in this case, he thought with remarkable calm. His foot had barely touched the brake when he rammed the elm. Worse, his old car had no airbags, and he had neglected to fasten his seat belt as the young officer directed.

The deer vanished even before Rueben completed his high-speed exit through the windshield. ●

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Art by Daniel Galanaugh

The Resurrection of Daniel Mason

by Patricia McFall

Daniel Mason dumped me the summer after I graduated from high school, and I hadn't heard from him since. But one cloudy Monday afternoon in January eight years later, his brother Sean phoned.

The unfamiliar voice asked, "This Lane?"

"Why not?" I said. "Lane Terry, licensed investigator, at your service. Who's this?"

"Baby Dude," he said, using as instant identification my old nickname for him. At the time, he'd been a squeaky-throated little blond surfer, but with a lot of urban swagger superimposed to copy his big brother. I smiled at the memory and waited to hear what he wanted. *He sounded nervous.* After claiming how great it was to be back in touch with me and how much he'd always liked me, and how bad he'd felt when Danny and I broke up, he added, "Um,

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Lane, like, he willed his body to medical research. . . ."

What would someone Daniel's age need with a will? He was only three years older than me, so he'd be how old now—twenty-seven?—no, twenty-eight.

A heartbeat later, I realized what Sean was telling me.

Southern Californians can sometimes deliver bad news in this inappropriately upbeat, even cheerful manner. It's a protective flat surface to cover up life's darkness, if not its depths. We natives shimmer like the Pacific off Dana Point on a cloudless day, never mind any storm gathering just beyond the lifeguards' range. So even as I registered the message of Daniel's death, I couldn't help judging his little brother as being a bit detached—and Laguna Beach standards aren't high.

Patricia McFall's new story for *EQMM* reintroduces Lane Terry, the twenty-five-year-old failed performance artist turned private eye who was first seen in the short mystery "The Just Missed Blonde," published in the 2001 Private Eye Writers of America's anthology *Mystery Street*. Ms. McFall is also the author of the well-reviewed novel *Night Butterfly* (Worldwide Library 1992/Pocket Books 1994). ¶

But what he said next changed my mind: "See, he OD'ed last year on New Year's Day, and my family just got the ashes back from the med school, so we're planning to have a burial at sea and, Lane, I'd really appreciate it if you'd be there."

Okay, so enough time had passed for him not to still feel the shock wave, but as for me, I sank down into the spavined old rattan chair in my living room cradling my forehead in my left hand. I tried to listen to what else Sean was saying. Apparently, he had rented a yacht to take his parents out past Newport Bay to scatter Danny's ashes that Friday morning. I was a good sailor and an old friend, and they wanted me to go. I agreed to join them. It took me a few false starts to find a pen and paper and write down the information in a madwoman's scrawl.

"You still there, Lane?"

"Yeah. I'm just—I can't talk."

"Well, look, we can talk later, but I . . ."

"No, go on. It's okay."

"I just want to thank you for helping."

"No problem. I have to go now, Sean. See you Friday on the dock."

Only after I'd hung up and cried and blown my nose and calmed down did it occur to me to wonder why nobody had told me a year earlier. And Sean's lack of curiosity about my occupation would have made me think if I hadn't been so raw with the news. Most

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old friends—especially those who'd known me as a performance artist and actress—had been astonished.

My mind was in and out of focus as I tried to process the hard fact of Daniel's death. He was only three years older than me. How could he be dead? Sure, I've worked several homicide cases as a licensed investigator, so I have probably seen more of death than most people have by twenty-five—Americans, anyway. Up until this point, though, it had only been strangers and my great-uncle Frank, who had smoked since he was fourteen and eaten red meat since the first day he could chew. Besides, he was eighty-four. What did he expect?

I put on a warm jacket and light hikers and followed Pacific Coast Highway downtown just to get away from being alone with my thoughts, but it was no good. As I looked beyond the boardwalk and the volleyball court at the January-gray convergence of sky and sea, I tried to believe Daniel Mason was dead. I realized that his self-inflicted habits had killed him, too, but much stronger and swifter bad habits than Uncle Frank's: cocaine and heroin instead of tobacco, and either fast food or self-starvation instead of comfort sludge. I turned inland at Ocean and plowed along the virtually empty sidewalk almost angry, scuffing a trail through fallen leaves. It really bothered me that Sean had waited until now to contact me, because we'd once been pretty close. Even though I knew the family had moved to Lake Elsinore soon after our breakup, Daniel had been my first boyfriend, from my fifteenth to my eighteenth summer. Worse, I'd recently ended another relationship that at this point seemed even less mature, ending in mutual loathing and amazement that we'd ever wanted to be in the same time zone as one another, let alone make love.

As I passed the playhouse, feeling a light sprinkle that had apparently begun while I wasn't paying attention, smelling the earth-spice of wet eucalyptus leaves, I looked across the street and remembered. Daniel and I had bought each other nose rings ($20 each, installed) from a vendor at the Sawdust Festival, an outdoor arts and crafts fair Laguna has in the summer. My mother had completely lost it over the nose ring, even though she'd always claimed to be a mellow 'sixties person, and overlooked the childish commitment implied by the occasion. I didn't care. I was in love for the first time, with someone I knew was my spiritual twin. Of course, six weeks later, Daniel and I were all over. Don't get me wrong; showing me to the off ramp was the greatest possible graduation present, since he was headed for a spectacular pileup and saw me as—how did he put it?—"sanctimonial." Daniel might have been hip, but not overly well read outside of the Beat poets and some of Public Enemy's more insolent lyrics. I admit that his opinion of me was more on the mark than his vocabulary, but I'm

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not going to apologize for being straight-edge. I lived healthy. I didn't do drugs, smoke, eat meat, or sleep with strangers. Things haven't changed. I drink alcohol only when it's necessary on a case. Other than the one on my right ankle, I don't even have any tattoos that show. Maybe that makes me a bore, but at least I'd survived.

And Daniel hadn't. Looking through the veil of raindrops, I stood across the street from the abandoned fairgrounds and imagined his voice, my name carried on a cold gust of the oncoming storm.

The rain finally let up on Thursday, but Friday was still a great day for a funeral. Cold, damp, the wind moaning over the sea as insistent as a soul in distress. We got underway without discussion. I helped Sean cast off and made his mom comfortable, the box of ashes in her lap.

But Mr. Mason wanted to act in charge. "I'll get the engine started and we'll be off. Where the hell's the pull on this thing?"

"It's a button, Dad. Just let us take care of it. You're not dressed to sail. Please?" Sean tried not to show his frustration, but so it went, his dad bellowing away, trying to run things but not knowing what he was doing. Sean restrained what must have been the urge to throw him overboard, and I have to say he acted pretty mature. Sean had the rugged appearance of full manhood now, not a trace of boy about him. He was only two years younger than me, but in the old days two years made a lot of difference. Now we seemed close to the same age. While he was busy reasoning with his dad, I quietly got the boat out of the harbor. We worked the boat without having to say much to each other, a good team by instinct, and I was glad to have something to do, since I'd remembered why I'd always liked Sean, and why I'd thought something less of his parents. Mr. and Mrs. Mason had nothing to say to me anyway, and never had thought younger people much worth talking to. It was sad to see how ungracefully the Masons had aged, how her cosmetic surgery only seemed to have made matters worse, how his suspiciously mahogany shade of hair did nothing to soften his authoritarian scowl. Though they hadn't seemed glad to see me, Sean genuinely had. That helped me feel better about agreeing to come.

In time, the wind got too loud to hear much. After a shouted conference with his parents, from which he came toward me looking ashamed, Sean cupped his hands, leaned in to form a wind tunnel between his mouth and my ear, and said, "You're great for doing this, Lane. Look, uh, my mom is too grossed out to scatter the ashes, and she wants me to, but I can't, I just can't. Will you?" The wind howled, the waves slapped the sides of the boat, and I tried to look at his face, but my hair blew across my eyes. He leaned in to my ear again. "Anyplace out here's good. Let's get it over with. When we're through, there's a few things I really need to tell you about."

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The guy could really pick a great time to act secretive, since I could barely make out what he was saying. I turned, tunneled, and said back, "Okay, give me the box."

He staggered back and got it, opening and holding it for me. Meanwhile, his mother stared at the rolling black clouds over the rising and falling horizon, and his dad sat at the helm trying to look like he was the captain of his soul or master of his fate or however that goes.

I'd never done this before, so rather than just dump the whole box overboard, I began scooping ashes out in my hand and flinging them down over the side, trying to avoid the wind getting them in anybody's face. The remains get pulverized into dust, and it wasn't as disgusting as you'd think, just kind of fine powder. To get the last of the ashes out without having to beat on the bottom, I reached deep inside and Sean tilted the box while I dumped the last bit into my palm. I made a loose fist and as the wind sifted the ashes through my fingers, I felt something square and hard in the palm of my hand. I peeked at it through my blowing hair. It was a metal tag, something like a soldier's dog tag, some kind of identifying label. I stuck it into my pocket to give to Sean later in case he wanted it.

The rain started falling again. We got back to shore wet, cold, and silent, heading for a nearby restaurant where the bar offered a blazing fire and an ocean view—actually, an increasingly black view of rain. We were led to a heavy table with captain's chairs around it. After we had drinks—hot toddies for the three of them and cocoa for me—the Masons thanked me and left in their car as though running away, but I stayed behind to hear what Sean wanted.

He sat looking into the liquid he swished around at the bottom of his mug. I couldn't help noticing his careless blond perfection, the black fringe of lashes, the sensitive mouth, the unexpectedly determined set of the square jaw. Fortunately, he chose then to talk. "Danny made me his executor. I guess that was because he was a user and knew he could die young."

"Yeah, but that's a lot of responsibility to lay on you, Sean. You were, what, twenty-two when he died?"

He shrugged his strong shoulders, somehow indicating he could handle weight, physical or symbolic. "Maybe he wanted to spare our folks. Maybe he knew they'd be too messed up to handle it. I was up to carrying out his wishes, but I felt a little strange right away about Nick Ludlow. He's the guy in charge of body donations for the school," he explained. "He didn't seem real normal."

"How not normal?"

"Just something not right. Anyway, I signed the donation papers, and the coroner's office sent Danny's body to the hospital over there after they were done with it. They did an autopsy, but the school could still use it. We never heard another word until

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just after Christmas. This Nick Ludlow calls me to ask me to meet him at the White House in Laguna at nine at night."

"A restaurant? At night? Whatever happened to an office during business hours?"

"Just what I wondered. He shows up in an unmarked van, dressed in a long leather coat like a Satanist or heavy metal. Not big, maybe five eight or nine, but built like he trains. Kind of red-blond hair and a little devil goatee. About our age." He paused to glance directly into my eyes.

I did a quick redirection of my eyes to the chocolate crude oil in the bottom of my mug. Our age, he'd just said. An intimate little encroachment, I'd say. Apparently Sean thought the gap between us had narrowed, too. I nodded, hoping he'd keep talking and miss hearing any respiratory uptick from my side of the table. Outside, the storm lashed at the windows, which also helped. Both the story and the storyteller were getting really interesting, and we could be there until closing for all I cared. "By the way, you'd make a good witness," I encouraged. "What else happened at the restaurant?"

"So Nick Ludlow says there's more papers to sign. He says I owe six hundred dollars for the cremation and returning the ashes. So I write out this check, but he tells me to make it out to some company called Academy Transport, not SCPU."

"Yeah," I said, slipping into professional mode, thank God. "That's a little insensitive, but neither here nor there since the university could be using a contractor."

"Oh. I didn't think of that. But there's this, too. He tells me to follow him out, and thanks me for the donation and tells me his assistant has the day off and can I help him pick up a donation."

"Shut up!" I said, astounded. "That's dis-gusting!" We exchanged an irresistible smile, though it wasn't exactly funny. "To be fair," I offered, "maybe it's like with cops, and people get jaded in his business."

"Guess so! He swings the back door open so I can see there's this zipped-up body bag back there on a gurney. You know what I think? He was getting off on it. I wasn't going anywhere with him. I told him I had to go, and you know what he says? 'We all gotta go sometime, man,' and starts to laugh. Then he slams the rear door, gets back in the front, and drives off."

So that was why he'd called me to join them today, not for old times' sake or out of family feeling, but because he already knew I was a private investigator. That's why he hadn't been surprised about my job when he called. He'd brought me in so he could find out why Nick Ludlow had been acting weird. I waited a long minute before I said, "So you wanted to ask me about it professionally. Is that it?"

Something about my tone must have made him feel sheepish,

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and he must have worried that I thought he wanted me to do it for free. "I know something isn't right, but they're not going to tell me anything. Of course, I can pay whatever you usually get. Okay?"

Hiding a little disappointment, I said, "No problem. You were right to get in touch, and you seem to be on to something. Besides that, I have something to show you I found in the box out there." I glanced at the window, where I saw my own windblown wild-woman image in the dark glass. Afternoon was turning to evening.

I showed him the tag from the box of ashes, which read, "SCPU Anat. Waste 12/7/2003." I waited while he did the obvious calculation I'd performed earlier in the ladies' room, where I'd gone to check the engraving out in better light.

Sean blinked. "I don't—this says they cremated him the month before he died," he said. "Not possible. Can't be right, Lane. This proves something's off."

Damn my guilty heart, this whole time I'd been thinking about juggling the workload at Lane Terry & Associates. I had just finished the undercover work for a swoop-and-squat insurance-fraud case. The only other nonretainer client we had was an unhappy mistress who thought her married lover was cheating on her—go figure —and that file was being handled by my associate, Ace Benoit, who was probably relishing every minute, the little pervert. I was free to take on a new case. I told myself it was for Daniel, and I heard someone with my voice say a little too fast, "So I guess you want me to check Ludlow out for you. Well, I'll see what I can do."

"You will?" he asked, relief crossing his face, and he grabbed my hand with both of his. Maybe it was only to shake on the deal, but the physical contact still had quite an effect. When he finally let my hand go, it was left feeling sad and lonely.

No doubt about it. My new client, once known as Baby Dude, had grown up to be Ooh, Baby, Baby.

Monday morning, I got up with the seagulls and channeled my wholly unprofessional lust into lots of productive work. After checking with the usual computer databases about a business license for Academy Transport—that was in the name of Darren Ford, person unknown—I looked for a criminal record for him and for a Nick or Nicholas or even Nikolai Ludlow. I came up nil and decided to go snoop around Southern California Pacific U's medical school next and see what I could find out. Figuring I wouldn't be very credible as a body donor, I decided to be a student, or a potential student.

The weather had turned hot overnight, the formerly rain-bearing wind shifting, then kicking into a dry, nasty Santa Ana, and here we were in February with a winter heat wave. I tried to look like a rich, plain-vanilla college student, with lots of product on

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the hair, retro horn-rimmed glasses, a tank top with full frontal couturier-of-the-week logo, a creamy strip of skin above the cropped hiphugger jeans, and a pair of designer-knockoff stiletto sandals convincing to all but the most devoted fashion slut. It was hot and gritty already at eleven A.M., and I was glad not to be back in the swoop-and-squat world of un-climate-controlled body shops and stuffy parking garages the insurance-fraud job had introduced me to.

The donation center was, appropriately enough, located in the basement, and I found a good lurking place just outside the row of burnished aluminum elevator doors flanked by large fan-shaped palms in architectural planters. Pretty fluffy, as my mother would say. The medical school must have been getting more donations than just cadavers. The plants offered sufficient cover for me to watch people come and go without attracting too much attention. Many of the medical students were identifiable enough, as they were younger and wearing those green pajama-looking scrubs, stethoscopes hanging around their necks as though to say, "Hey, check me out, I'm a freaking doctor!" Most of the real doctors, male and female, seemed to be wearing suits, a few fairly sporty outfits. Virtually nobody had the Marcus Welby shirt I remembered from my childhood, white tunic with a priest's collar, made out of some creepy half-see-through material that showed the guy's undershirt or worse, chest fur. Now, that's best seen on purpose and in private or not at all, as far as this girl's concerned.

Just after eleven by the brushed-nickel built-in clock over the opposite bank of elevators, a very elegant, cosmetically thin, silver-haired woman in a tailored blue pinstripe trouser suit, who had been up and down the elevator several times, stopped and offered to help me "find something." She looked like somebody's boss, and wondered if I were lost.

I smiled winningly. "Oh, no, I'm just waiting for a friend and it's hot outside."

She looked surprised. "It is?" She looked down at her wrist, where there was a thin platinum timepiece that must have cost her at least a day in consultation fees. "I do believe I worked right through the night and half the day again." She shook her head and trotted away in her comfort pumps, looking too busy to worry about me, and I continued to lounge. Finally, just before noon, I saw a strawberry-blond guy in a long black leather coat stroll over to the elevator and, hands clasped waist high, index fingers straight, lean into the Up button. I hated the little hotdog already, but this was my elevator, and I was getting on. Fortunately for me, it was lunchtime, and several others crowded into the car ahead of me, so Ludlow never noticed me. I consider myself an excellent chameleon anyway, legs and arms pressed against the side of the

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elevator, turning pale silver and invisible.

I spent that afternoon shadowing the unmarked van in the firm's black SUV, grateful that they're now so common in Southern California as to be rendered as anonymous as a beige Honda Accord once was. I hated gassing it and parking it, but for visibility of the quarry, it was the P.I.'s car of choice. I hung way back and escorted Mr. Nick Ludlow from a discreet distance as he stopped in Fullerton to pick up a big blond ape with a droopy moustache who looked like a sweaty over-buffed bouncer. I made note of the address on my digital voice recorder, a priceless—and safety-conscious—substitute for pen and ink while driving. It was just possible that the ape was Darren Ford, DBA Academy Transport.

Ludlow's van returned south to an upscale nursing home in Corona Del Mar, where the two went in with a wad of papers and came out with an occupied body bag. They took their delivery to the medical school's loading area, where I couldn't follow, but I waited on a hunch, and they came back in five minutes with an identical-looking bag. We took the freeway to an area north of San Pedro where there were several oil refineries and one Heritage Cremation Services, Inc., the same outfit that had cremated Daniel—well, what someone had passed off as Daniel, presumably. The men disappeared inside with the bag, and I sat and thought. It could have been an honest error, of course, but I trusted Sean as a judge of character—hadn't he come looking for me? In any case, you had to wonder about a guy who won't take off his leather coat when it's over eighty-five degrees, or had friends who looked like that blond creep.

When they drove past where I waited outside down the block, I followed them onto the freeway ramp, staying well back, but then some pissy little worm in a rice rocket cut me off, and I lost them in the afternoon traffic going south. I got off at the next exit and sat in a strip-mall parking lot cursing the worm and myself until I calmed down to consider other options. On impulse, the SUV having blacked-out windows that facilitate quick wardrobe changes. I altered my image with the substitution of a black knit dress for the tank and jeans, black flats for the stiletto sandals. I kept the horn rims but added some pink lipstick, then wrestled my shoulder-length hair into something resembling a loose French twist. My own mother wouldn't have picked me out of a lineup. I got back on the freeway going north, returned to the crematory, and strolled in. My business card claimed I was a reporter for the Orange County News Agency, a local concern that was acquired out of existence five years previous, now one of the bank of fictitious corporate voicemail systems created for the use of Lane Terry & Associates. I know what you're thinking, but it's not illegal to impersonate someone if it isn't a sworn peace officer. I only

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do that when I have to.

A severe-looking older woman with her hair slicked into a tight little bun that probably never got a vacation looked up, then came to the counter. If the place smelled like anything worse than hot bricks, fortunately the surrounding refineries covered it up with their industrial stench. She looked sour and thin-lipped. I thought she was going to be tough, like trying to pry a giant clam open with a set of blunt nail clippers, but when I handed her the card, she smiled brightly and asked what she could do for me. Maybe she didn't get a lot of visitors—well, not the kind you could talk to. "I'm on a story about funeral options," I explained. "With overpopulation and real-estate prices and all, so many people are going the cremation route—" I gestured globally—"and I wondered if you could tell me something about it—like, how's business?" I smiled expectantly, and she shrugged.

"It's steady," she deadpanned, and I smiled appreciatively, wondering if she got a lot of mileage from that line at trade shows.

We talked about the expense of plots and the decline of some religious groups' objections to cremation, talked about a few of the scandals like the place down in Georgia where they decided putting dead folks out in the fresh air was an economically sound alternative to getting their incinerator repaired, and I turned the conversation around to the local business, peppering her with questions: "Do you ever deal directly with families or individuals? Any institutional customers other than funeral homes?"

"All of the above. We have contracts with a couple of hospitals, you know, teaching hospitals attached to medical schools."

"Oooh," I said, "bet that's interesting."

"Well, not really. Most of 'em's pretty straightforward, lots of paperwork for an entire body, the State of California requires it. Human remains get respect."

"Good," I gulped. "And the others?"

She made a wrinkle-nosed expression that brought out the rodent in her appearance. "That's kind of, you know, icky."

Icky? I waited, knowing that silence is a vacuum into which most people will pitch their darkest secrets if you let them.

"We get these sealed boxes from the hospitals, and we're not allowed to look inside."

"Really? What's that about?"

"When they have various parts, like when medical students dissect an arm?"

I was getting greener and greener thinking about an arm lying there all by itself, maybe with its palm heavenward. It wasn't easy, this death business, and I tried not to think of Daniel Mason, his arm.

The lady was saying, "When it's all mixed up like that, different

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people's body parts, they just throw 'em into a box labeled 'Anatomical Waste' to be incinerated, and it's actually against the law to open the box. Not that I'd ever want to, but—"

The telephone rang, and I froze like a memorial statue in Forest Lawn. The lady cleared her throat, apologized that she had to get back to work, and I thanked her and almost ran to the door. Another time, I wished I could get a look at their records, wished I could get more out of her about how they documented the process. The heat outdoors was like an oven opening wide, but I was shivering and glad to get out of there. Daniel's label had said "Anat. Waste," not his name. Something was definitely wrong, at the very least the medical school's record keeping, but possibly more.

Daniel had died by overdose, not murder, but—I didn't want to jump to conclusions, but—talk about the perfect crime. When you can cut people up and nobody can legally look at what's in there before it's burned beyond identification? I walked right past my car and caught myself and had to turn back.

I figured if I was going to go back to the medical school undercover, I'd need to look right to get Ludlow's attention, so he'd see me as friendly to his weird personal style. Now, black leather can certainly mean different things to different people, and I didn't want to get off on the wrong foot. I settled for a super-hip, semi-nihilistic, modified Goth/punk/vampire look. I spent the evening constructing it, and the heat wave broke as quickly as it had started, the Santa Anas out of breath in thirty-six hours. I returned to the basement elevators' palm jungle in a short black leather dress and clumpy boots. I'd added some temporary Asian tattoos—a dragon curling around my left biceps, some calligraphy the box claimed meant "warrior spirit lives in this one" on my right calf, my newly recommissioned nose ring back in place, plus dark burgundy lipstick, very white face makeup, black charcoal eyes, and what I liked to think of as my white-girl dreadlocks, mouse brown rendered jet black with a temporary rinse. On the street in New York City, the look would undoubtedly have both a name and its own boutique, but I hoped the effect on Nick Ludlow would be to seem vaguely familiar but not too easy to pin down to an actual subgroup in a subculture.

I walked in at eight A.M. on the nose and introduced myself as Madison, the office temp sent to help him with the computer files.

He looked me up and down, his face a study of mixed emotions. "I didn't ask for any office temp," he observed.

"I know. I'm a surprise," I said flatly. "They say you can use some help since you're supposed to be so busy." I implied he shouldn't be wasting time arguing about it. I wished I'd got some gum, just to seem dumber and more sullen, and to have some stage business, but you can't think of everything.

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He frowned, and the dandruff revealed on his eyebrows didn't improve his looks any. His haircut sort of looked like a strawberry-blond retro Beatles cut, but not as flattering. Of course, he might be a prince on the inside, but before I could find that out, I had to convince him I was legitimate. I handed him an official-looking work order from "temphelpfast," all lower case and very avant-garde typography, another of the belly-up businesses my firm now operated. "You can call 'em if you want," I said, looking like I got paid by the hour and didn't give a flying whatever about who paid me.

He was reading it with suspicion. "I don't see anyone's name from here as the person who placed the order." His eyes narrowed nastily. "Did Dr. Cannon do this?"

Whoever Dr. Cannon was, that was good enough for me. "I dunno," I said. "It mighta been."

"Well, let's go ask her." You could tell he hated this Dr. C. He started to leave, and I clumped daintily behind.

Dr. Gwen Cannon looked familiar. Then I recognized her as the woman who'd tried to help me find where I was going the day before. She was wearing a grey tone-on-tone dress with a matching jacket, exquisitely pieced and embroidered. As before, she looked tired, but she wasn't looking at me. She gave Ludlow what you might call a withering look, then took me in with an "and you are?" lift of her aristocratic brows. I didn't think she recognized me from my previous incarnation.

Ludlow handed her the work order. "If you thought I needed help, you might've asked me," he said evenly, though I could see that his jaw was clenched.

The lady was smart. She read it, looked at him, looked again at me, a little longer. "Actually, there are several different assignments I had in mind for Ms. Madison."

She was pretending she knew about it!

I was too nonplussed to tell her Madison was my first name, with the last name left blank. It was an anti-system statement by my persona, but that seemed somewhat moot here. Dr. Cannon waved Nick Ludlow to the door. "She should have reported to me first. Well, never mind. I'll bring her in and explain it all to you in a few minutes."

When he was gone, she shut the door and turned to face me, an intrigued smile on her face. "All right, young lady. For whom do you really work, pray tell? Are you still meeting a friend, or have you found her?"

Dr. Cannon arranged her clothes carefully as she sat down, and she gestured me to a chair. I couldn't help noticing that gray was her color, and that she'd decorated the postmodern office in gray, with shades of black, white, and splashes of red on the window valance

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and pillows for more impact. The walls had all kinds of framed papers attesting to her success in life—licenses, certificates, and winning lottery tickets for all I could tell from where I sat.

Her voice was clipped but not angry when she asked, "Ms. Madison, what exactly are you up to here?"

When I'm on a case, I have a strict policy of keeping as much of the truth out of it as possible, no matter how much I instinctively trust someone, but I had nowhere to go this time. The lady was certainly nobody's fool, and I didn't want her for an enemy. "The family of one of the body donors hired me," I said. "My real name's Lane Terry. Here." Figuring that she was going to check me out anyway, and that there was no point in getting thrown into a security mess while she decided what to do with me, I inserted my thumb and index finger down into the side of my right boot, extracted a laminated card, and handed it to her. She carefully recorded the pertinent information from my State of California investigator's license before she handed it back.

I went on, "Apparently, there had been something strange about the way the body was handled—"

Her eyes shifted to a point down and to her left, signally visual memory. Maybe she'd seen something too, and she'd been wondering about the guy all along.

I hesitated, expecting her to say something, but when she didn't, I told her this little lie to lead her off Sean's scent: that Mr. Ludlow had picked up the remains at the rest home where my client's loved one had passed away. He'd come in an unmarked van, and then told the family there were charges for transportation and for the return of the ashes, payable to some private company.

Dr. Cannon took all this data in, the only change in her expression a slight hardening around the mouth. In her efficient way, she held up a hand to signal that she'd heard enough. "This is what I was afraid of when we hired him. Our program director had just retired. Nick just seemed so convenient, young but well trained, and he convinced the interview committee that he had 'extensive marketing experience'—" here she finger-hooked quotation marks in the air—"from his family's funeral home. He said he could put these entrepreneurial skills to work in our service." She sniffed. "We'll have to see whether he used those skills in our service or, if not, in whose." She sighed. "All right, Ms. Terry, I'm putting you to work. You go right on as Ms. Madison. But I don't want anyone but the two of us to know. Fair? Nothing in writing, and I'll pay you in cash. I assume the family won't object?"

Since there wasn't one, only this adorable younger brother I was trying not to obsess about, I assured her that the family would not object. I certainly understood why Dr. Cannon would like to avoid asking for a disbursement of university funds to conduct an out-

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landish investigation on an employee without any formal complaint being brought. It would only make her look ridiculous if she turned out to be wrong. I could see it from her point of view. Outlandish or not, she still wanted someone to get the goods on Ludlow, and I couldn't have been more pleased. This way, I would be on a "real" case, uncomplicated by friendship. With Dr. Cannon's protection, I'd have all the access and authority I needed to find out what happened to Daniel.

"That's fine," I said, "so long as you appreciate that my clients are also entitled to expect my discretion."

She nodded and stood, glancing at her elegant wrist watch. I could see upside down that the band was definitely platinum, in keeping with her color scheme, and that the time was eight-twenty.

"Let's get to work," she said. "Tell me, are you actually any good with a computer?"

I admit that I smirked while nodding.

"Good. Then your ostensible assignment is to work on cleaning up Mr. Ludlow's predecessor's records, getting them in shape before we close the books. Then he won't get the idea you're checking up on him. His isn't the only area I manage, so if he asks what else you're doing, tell him I'm forming a task force on medical-malpractice insurance coverage. That's completely out of his area, and it's not likely to interest him. Your hours are eight to five, an hour for lunch. Every day, take a coffee break at ten sharp and come report to me."

I shook her well-manicured hand with my vampire-manicured one and went to report to Nick Ludlow.

The next couple of days were tense but exciting. I kept Sean updated at two mostly unnecessary meetings he requested. At the first, he insisted on giving me a check right away, and it was all I could do, standing over him as he wrote it out, to keep from reaching out and touching the blond bangs, almost transparent, that spilled into the sunlight as he bent over the desk. Then there was his voice, the way his saying an ordinary word or phrase, say, "Be careful, Lane," made me want to tear off clothing—his, mine, somebody's. I was barely managing to ignore what I hoped was rampaging mutual attraction, and I had to go to the med school just to be able to concentrate.

Unfortunately, the hospital had its share of other distractions, though far from pleasant ones. There, when I looked up promising files like "Current Month Disposal Records" and "Heritage Crem. Svcs.," I had to quickly change to another screen whenever I saw Nick Ludlow coming. Felt him coming, that is. Creepy little undertaker that he was, he sneaked around as if he had felt soles glued onto his shoes. He also expected slave service from me, things like, "Go down to the cafeteria and get me a double latte with plenty of

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chocolate sprinkles, Madison. I'll, um, pay you when you get back." Which he did the first time, but on the morning of the second day, he pretended to be out of change. No worries; that afternoon I found his cash stash, reimbursed myself, and instituted a money-up-front policy. There was no way that fool was going to get over on me.

The third day, I found some information about Daniel's donation, but only some: inbox, no outbox. No internal tracking to say whether the remains had been used for dissection once they arrived, either. I developed a theory: Maybe Ludlow was just giving any old ashes to whoever asked for—read, paid for—ashes, remembering to remove the "anatomical waste" tag that identified a mix of bodies except in that one case. Or maybe he didn't bother, and nobody made anything out of it. You know: Here's a tag, but it's dated six months after Grandma passed on, and so what if they call it something strange; they're doctors, right?

That theory led to another possibility. Maybe Daniel was still on the premises. I didn't like it, but I had to get into the refrigerated area where the actual cadavers were kept.

The next day, I told Dr. Cannon that I needed to check that the remains had been correctly labeled and routed from Point A to Point B, and out the door at Point C. An orderly person like her would certainly approve of this systematic approach, since even a cursory examination showed that Ludlow's files were useless. Maybe the cadaver drawers were labeled alphabetically like files. I'd have to see, but I kind of doubted it, since you'd have to be reshuffling them all the time—never mind.

Trying to sound casual, I told Dr. Cannon, "I can't tell from the files where anybody's remains physically are. If the cadavers have documentation with them—"

"Sure," she murmured, rummaging around in a desk drawer. Maybe she was so used to being around stiffs it meant nothing to her, but she barely looked up from the computer screen she seemed to be reading at the same time she talked to me. She pulled out a key tagged "Cold Room." When she pressed it into my hand, I must admit, I shivered at the suggestion. Wasn't the cold room where we all ended up? Except for the ones who burned in hell, I supposed.

I called Sean on my cell phone as soon as I could get some privacy, and arranged to meet him at Sudz, a brew pub in Laguna, at six-thirty for an update, telling him I had lots of news to report. "You're amazing, Lane," he said, "just amazing," and I found myself slinking back to the office to wait with the anticipation of a lioness closing in on prey.

Around two that afternoon, Ludlow left to pick up a donation. Trying to look as casual as possible, I pulled on a ski sweater and covered myself with some scrubs. I put on a face mask and a pair of paper bootees—no small trick over boots—and unlocked the

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cooler with the key Dr. Cannon had given me. It let me into a foyer with big rubber-gasketed doors on the opposite side. When I stepped onto the welcome mat, they whooshed open, loud and unnerving, then whooshed closed behind me.

The place was like a huge refrigerated safe-deposit box vault, metallic and sterile and overlit once the motion detectors switched on the overheads. A smell like rotten meat kept getting worse as I walked inside. I pretended that it didn't bother me. There must have been more than a hundred drawers, all labeled with identification numbers that didn't correspond to anything on the lists I had printed out. Being systematic, I went straight over to the far left side, top row of five, using a wheeled ladder provided for the purpose. There were gurneys with lifters to get the contents of the top drawers out, but I didn't try to understand how they worked because I wasn't taking anything with me. I slid the first door open and was relieved that the occupant had been loaded head-in, with only a pair of small marble-white feet to look at when I opened the drawer.

Even if I didn't have to look the cadaver in the face, I felt my throat tightening up on me, my eyes filling. This was not fun, and I pushed the door shut before I remembered what I was there to do. I reopened it, and saw that there was indeed a toe-tag, like the morgues use, hanging down with the name Pearl Jacobs, date of death and donation, and the same reference number as on the outside of the drawer. I checked my list for Pearl Jacobs, and it took a while since it wasn't in alpha order, but there she was, waiting for dissection by a gerontological-medicine lab class in a couple of weeks.

I hurried across the first row, maybe twenty drawers, with all the names checking out where there was a toe tag, but some cadavers didn't have any. Then I noticed something important: I could see from the dates that the only ones with toe tags were from the old administrator, before Ludlow took over. I also noticed that the typeface for the number-identification labels on the outside of the drawers was different for each of the two groups, which had been interspersed. Why? Out of laziness or incompetence, or to disguise a deception? At the end of the bottom row, several of the drawers from his regime were empty despite having identification numbers—with no record of disposition I could find. Bad record-keeping, to say the least. Something strange was being done, but I would need more time and information to sort it out.

A quick time check gave me at least fifteen minutes before Ludlow returned, if I didn't freeze first. I now knew which drawers held bodies donated during his tenure, so I could skip the others and pull out the "possible" drawers far enough to look for Daniel. I steeled myself and rolled the first out as far as it would go, which

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was only halfway. There was nothing for it but to figure out how to use one of the hoists. It turned out to be not so big a deal because there were illustrated instructions printed on the side of the gurney contraption, but it did take a little maneuvering. My teeth were chattering full time, but I told myself it was only from the cold, and not about these things that had once been people.

In the middle of the third row, I found Daniel. A shock wave passed through me as I recognized him, saw what seven years of dissipation could do to a beautiful face, and I wobbled on the stepladder, sitting kind of fetal-sidesaddle to regroup, shivering and crying and thinking how much Sean and he looked alike, and wishing I'd never agreed to take the case. I pulled myself together to say a last goodbye and get out.

I knew I'd have to talk to Dr. Cannon, and if she didn't want to involve the authorities, I would anyway. Sean would have to make a positive ID and decide what to do with the remains, but I was certain he'd want them back. I could leave for good now, case closed. I counted over to the location of the drawer so I could easily find it again, underlined the ID number on my list, and put everything back, wiping my kohl-lined eyes on the sleeve of the scrub as I turned to leave.

The doors went *whoosh* like hellfire coming down a tunnel.

Believe me, Nick Ludlow looked as surprised to see me as I was to see him. He was pushing a gurney with a long shape on it covered by a sheet. I guess my scrubs provided only a momentary disguise, because he said, "Madison! What are you doing in here?"

"Checking records for Dr.—"

"Since when do they need checking in here? What is this shit?" he almost screamed, his eyes bulging and his neck veins popping out. "Listen. This area is *mine.* Just get out of here, and keep out." He didn't need to ask me twice. I quick-stepped on out of there, but not before I heard him yell, "You understand the consequences for you?"

I understood his question as equivalent to "You die, bitch," and ran, a little wobbly in the knees, to Dr. Cannon's office to report everything. Unfortunately, according to the posted schedule, she and her assistant were both out for the rest of the afternoon. I realized I could keep my appointment with Sean and come back after Ludlow went off shift at eight. I decided to avoid Ludlow by pulling off the scrubs and heading for the employee cafeteria, where I could leave Dr. Cannon a voicemail that I wanted to talk to her later that evening. I could also use a stiff shot of caffeine—not that my nerves needed any more stimulation, but it helps you think.

Sudz was situated in a converted old building with several smaller rooms served by one big bar. I wound upstairs through a lively TGIF crowd of locals—in winter, the tourist population drops and

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the whole place relaxes—and found Sean looking gorgeous, a bit nervous, and happy to see me. But his smile faltered as I approached. He knew. He was a pretty sensitive guy doing a grad internship in counseling, and the first words out of his mouth were, "Lane, are you okay? What happened?"

I didn't answer but gestured at the door to the next staircase. "Let's go up to the roof patio." I needed fresh air in the worst way; my nostrils could still detect the revolting smell of decomposition mixed with chemicals.

There wasn't anyone up on the patio because it was cool, but they were serving. When we got settled outside on a wooden garden bench at a table near a gas heater, Sean kindly ordered a brew for himself, a plate of nachos for both of us, and turned to me to see what I wanted—a virgin tonic. When the server was gone, I looked right at him and said, "I'm sorry, Sean, but I found Daniel in the morgue."

His face showed surprise, sadness, and pity. "Oh no. You poor kid," he said, putting a strong arm around me and squeezing my shoulder a bunch of times. I couldn't help smiling at how he was trying to protect me. Guys all have the instinct to herd, bless their little warrior hearts.

"Really, I'm fine," I said, but I didn't exactly wriggle out of it because I really wasn't, and it felt so much better to be held than not. There's a time for acting like a professional, and this clearly wasn't it. We sat and communed in silence, Sean giving me time to put things together before I talked again.

After the server brought our order, I explained the whole business in the Cold Room up to when Ludlow threw me out.

Sean said, half to himself, "Why'd Ludlow be giving back these ashes from bits and pieces of several people?"

I answered, "To cover up the fact that the body's still there?"

"Maybe it was a mix-up, and they were too embarrassed—"

I stopped him with a look. We both knew better. Ludlow's anger had nothing to do with embarrassment. I considered picking up a nacho because I hadn't eaten all day, but I didn't feel hungry. I left the food where it was and said, "Look, I need to get back."

He looked totally shocked. "You're not going back there."

I hadn't told Sean, but I knew that the answer must lie in the computer. I happen to be a journeyman hacker—thanks for not passing that along to anyone with a badge—and I had been on the verge of uncovering some tracks the day before, just when Ludlow sent me on some stupid errand picking up a package of embalming supplies from across the campus. It gave me the creeps wondering if he was on to me, and I'd decided to start over when he wasn't going to be around. And now, of course, I was thoroughly afraid of the guy. You don't forget those rabid eyeballs overnight.

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Especially overnight. But it was already seven-thirty, and he'd be gone by the time I got back there.

I turned to Sean and tried to sound forceful. "The minute the cops come in, I won't have another chance at the records. Don't worry, he won't be there."

"Well, I'm going with you."

I decided to let him. He could wait outside and watch for Nick Ludlow, just in case, while I dug.

To be cautious, Sean and I checked the lot where Nick Ludlow parked his private car, which wasn't there. I gave Sean a good description of the car; he knew what Ludlow looked like because he'd met him. As soon as Sean spotted the car, he was supposed to call my cell, then follow Ludlow inside. I got down to the office and nobody was there, so I started working as soon as I checked phone and e-mail and found nothing from Dr. Cannon. Ludlow wasn't any software genius, but it was nearly ten-thirty by the time I found the right trick, and up popped some interesting records.

It turned out that Nick Ludlow indeed had the marketing know-how that he'd claimed to Dr. Cannon in his job interview. He just hadn't chosen to share the benefits of that expertise. Something called "University Anatomical Supply Division" was doing a brisk business in everything from frozen spines to fresh heads, shipping all over the States to teaching hospitals and medical schools, with Nick Ludlow at the helm. There was a reason he hid the records on a CD-ROM, and I felt pretty certain that the company wasn't a "division" of the university—or of anything else, for that matter. My hunch was that the company was Nick, and Nick was the company. I started adding up the proceeds, and found that he must have taken in nearly a quarter of a million dollars in a bit over a year—not bad for a side job.

I sent copies of the files to Dr. Cannon and to myself at Lane Terry & Associates, just in case I ever needed them. Then I got on-line and did some quick research on the illegal traffic in organs and body parts, from its current very lucrative practice back to the days when medical students were obliged to do a bit of graverobbing in the eighteenth century in order to provide their own cadaver for dissection. Later, they hired professionals called "resurrection men" who had seen a market in sparing students this nasty rite of passage. A little dark humor for—I glanced at the clock—the stroke of midnight. I wondered if Sean waited faithfully outside, but somehow I knew he was still there. My eyes felt full of gravel. Probably that stupid Goth/vampire mascara on top of fatigue, and I was trying to remember if I'd already drunk the Red Bull I'd stashed away in the office fridge when I heard someone coming.

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It might be Sean, or the cleaning crew, or a late-working student, or maybe that modern graverobber Nick Ludlow. I shut everything down and stepped away from the desk, knowing what it would look like with me at his computer. The last thing I wanted to do was go back There, but that was the obvious place to hide, being at the rear of the office suite, unless I wanted to brazen it out by sitting at my own desk, pretending to be working. I imagined that getting into one of the unoccupied drawers might work, if I could figure out how to close it—and open it again—from the inside. I started for the Cold Room.

"My, Ms. Terry—you've certainly been working overtime," said Dr. Cannon's familiar voice.

"You—scared—me," I managed to gasp while hyperventilating. "Didn't you get your messages?"

She looked amused, also well groomed despite probably being on her feet since eight A.M.—come to think of it, so had I. I wondered if some paranormal force handled her schedule and why I didn't hate her on principle. I explained to her what I'd found. She looked impressed and smiled broadly. "To look at you, so young, you'd never guess that in this short time—well, let's get this wrapped up. Why don't you stay a little longer and put together a final report for me while I get some paperwork off my desk?"

"I was just starting to write one, and I can tough it out if you can," I said bravely, even though I was dead on my feet. Fear and its release can really be exhausting.

She went straight to her office, where I could hear her rummaging around and clacking away on her keyboard.

I wrote the report as fast as my whacked-out mind could manage. Everything made sense now. The worse Ludlow's records were, the easier it was for him to hide how many cadavers were being sold. Before I could pop the report off to her I felt Dr. Cannon behind me. She was in a hurry to wrap things up.

"I've been reading your other report off the screen," she explained. "I think we'll just leave it at that, and I'd like to handle Mr. Ludlow administratively rather than turn this into another medical scandal. I'm sure you understand."

I kind of resented Dr. Cannon not wanting to bring charges against Ludlow, but of course it wasn't my call. One of the crappy things about investigative work was that you couldn't rat out your client and stay in business very long. You kept a lot to yourself, and moral compromises were part of the job. Still, she was letting a bad guy walk—and I was looking the other way.

My big mouth, acting on its own, hazarded an opinion: "I guess a lot of crime gets covered up because nobody at the top wants to be embarrassed. I think you ought to bring charges against Ludlow, show the world that you don't share in his corruption."

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She seemed to give that some thought. "Well, yes, involving the authorities remains an option, but it will require some persuasion. You know how bureaucracies work." She gave me a little smile, looking for the first time a bit vulnerable and tired, and reached into her pocket for an envelope. "I think this should more than cover your work," she said as she handed it to me. "Now, I want to handle personally this individual matter of the other client's donation. Can you tell me enough for me to help?"

I knew Sean would have no objections if it meant getting things straightened out. "Ludlow gave them someone else's ashes. The person's remains are still here, on the premises."

She looked alarmed. "Where? In the Cold Room?"

"Where else? But I can tell you this much for sure. They're going to want the body back so they can—"

"Of course, but are you certain? I knew Nick was dishonest, but this is beyond terrible. I'm sure the university will want to make a formal apology. And I'm ultimately responsible to them. If I hadn't been distracted with other things—" she glanced at her expensive watch as though time were to blame—"I'd have kept a better eye on him. Now, I don't wish to make you uncomfortable, but would you mind showing me which cadaver it is?"

"Don't worry; Ludlow doesn't know which one it is," I said. "He isn't going to get back in here, is he?" I was afraid he'd cause the body to disappear before Sean could lay claim to it, so he could deny the whole thing.

"Get back in? Ms. Terry, this is a serious matter. The first thing I'm going to do when we're done is to notify security and human resources that he's not to be permitted on the premises. I'll put him on administrative leave without pay, then see that he's discharged." She sounded very righteous and determined, with a look in her eyes I was glad wasn't directed at me. "Beyond all that, you've convinced me about the police. I will do whatever is in my power to see that he faces charges, but it has to be done through channels. All right. Let's get this thing wrapped up, shall we?"

I tried to feel reassured, but when we went back in there, the cold lights glaring, I shivered my way across to where Daniel lay at rest.

I opened the drawer, and maybe I stood there a little too long, because she said with a touch of impatience, "I'll keep you posted on the outcome of the proceedings against Mr. Ludlow. I guess that finishes it."

"You're forgetting me," said Ludlow's voice behind her. I think he'd been listening for a while, because I hadn't heard the doors open a second time. He sure as hell looked pissed off enough to have heard everything. They say never put a suspect between you and the door, so I sidled toward it, the way you do if you think

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something nasty is about to unfold and you'd rather be somewhere else. I figured neither of them would notice, because they were getting ready to kill each other.

"You bitch, you think you're going to lay it all on me?" he asked.

She said to Ludlow, "What are you talking about? You know better than to try to implicate me."

"*Implicate* you? It was your—"

He stood there, blinking. I knew his astonishment was real. He was too stupid to be a good actor.

Oh, God. So she was in it, too!

I said, as much to myself as to him, "She's going to sell you out." I ran for the door, but she moved fast enough to intercept me. That's when I saw the disposable scalpel in her hand. Like lightning, she had it at my throat, her other hand gripping my arm to keep me from moving.

I couldn't hear much over the thundering bass drum beating in my ears, but made out Dr. Cannon saying, "Don't say another word." She gripped my arm tighter, and next I felt the faintest tingle quickly turning to a tiny burning spot at the base of my throat. But she stopped there. I couldn't move to see if I had started to bleed, but it felt like it.

"You're one fine little detective," she said with contempt. "Too bad nobody will ever get to know how good you were."

I noted her use of the past tense.

She eased up on my throat and arm, then gave me a little shove. "Now open that drawer. I have the scalpel right here, so please do cooperate, Ms. Terry."

I knew self-defense, but she knew medicine, so I had to play along. I knew why she was doing it, and what she planned to do with me. Death from hypothermia, no blood, nice and neat, just like her. The perfect crime, anatomical waste, illegal to open the boxes she put me into. I saved myself the indignity of repeating the old line about how she wouldn't get away with it, and thought of ways to leave behind some forensic evidence as I rolled the drawer open and set a clunky boot awkwardly inside, playing for a little more time.

She had a voice of command when she said, "Nick, get that ladder over here so we can keep the drawer closed."

Ludlow was a little slow, but he got it. "What? Hey, I'm no murderer!"

Dr. Cannon turned to him just long enough for me to shift my weight and arc my booted foot out of the drawer, through the air, and smack into her ribs with a satisfying impact. She'd been asking for it. With a screech she went down, but I didn't wait to see what happened next. I ran out the doors, and jammed a chair leg into the handles to keep both bad guys in while I went for help.

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I ran to the elevator, but before I could hit the Up button, the doors opened on Sean, shaken at the sight of blood on my throat, ready to attack something, and utterly gorgeous. Also an eager, wiry little security guard with one hand on the gun protruding from his holster.

It was about six-thirty A.M. when the police were finished with us and I'd had the superficial cut bandaged. I changed clothes again in the SUV and met Sean at a chain coffee shop where, over steaming cups, we smiled like survivors.

"You were something, the way you talked to the cops, the way you handled yourself, everything. You were great. I think I was falling in love with you."

I ignored that because my nervous system had had enough jolts for the last twenty-four hours and anyway, I couldn't tell if he was joking or not. "Look, I wasn't great. In fact, I messed up big time. I ignored my own rules."

"Like what?"

"Never trust your client completely—I mean her, not you. I missed so much of what I should have seen. She rolled over way too easy at the beginning, paying me under the table, all kinds of warning signs." I shook my head, thinking how life was full of disappointments. Like Sean was going to fade back out of my world now that the case was closed. Like Dr. Cannon wasn't going to get life without parole. It's not nice, but I was kind of glad she cut herself so badly with her own damn scalpel—sweet irony—that she had to make her demands for a lawyer from a bed in the jail hospital ward.

Sean smiled and reached out and took my hand. "Hey, it's all over now. Cash or check? And what are you doing after breakfast?"

That made me laugh. With some sense of entering unknown territory, I curled my fingers into his. "After breakfast," I said, serious now, "I'm going to walk along the beach and remember Daniel. I don't mind if you come along to help." ●

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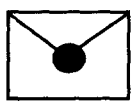

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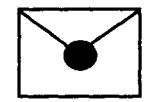

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PUNCTURE POINT

by Peter Turnbull

MONDAY, 3RD JANUARY.

It was cold, very cold, pleasantly, reassuringly cold, for this was January of the year, still within the twelve days of Christmas; it was as it should be, as cold as the man could wish it, as cold as he recalled it being in his childhood. It was the period of snow and ice and biting easterlies, of the weather that folk would complain about. But in the last few years the winters had been mild, too mild, unhealthily mild, more like a prolonged autumn than a proper winter. No good, hard, prolonged frost, which killed off all the sickly fauna and flora, and occasionally, tragically, a few aged and sickly humans as well, but then, the man thought, that was the nature of winter, it was how things should be in this part of the world, and this winter was like the winters of old. Not as long-lasting, perhaps, but the cold snap had lasted for a few days now, ice formed on ponds, householders worried about burst pipes, black ice caused car accidents, the air was cold to breathe for the first time in a very long time. The man walked with his dog on Askham Bogs; the ground beneath his feet reassuringly frozen. His dog, as all dogs are, was unhappy in the heat, but this weather suited him admirably, and the man himself, wrapped up against the cold, felt a sense of reassurance as he surveyed the frosty, Christmas-card-like scene, for this is exactly, exactly how it should be in Yorkshire during the winter. It was in Askham Bogs that the man, the dog-walker, met another man who did not complain about the weather. The second man was dead.

The dog walker first saw the man when he was still some dis-

Called "the best of our home-grown police proceduralists" by Britain's *Guardian* newspaper, Peter Turnbull has used several different settings for his procedurals over the years. His Glasgow P-Division stories were based on his experiences as a social worker in Glasgow. After he'd returned to his native Yorkshire, he began a new series set in York. His latest book, *Reality Check* (Allison & Busby) is set in Cambridge, England.

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tance away. His heart thumped in his chest at the sight, a pit seemed to open in his stomach with such suddenness that it felt like he had been punched. Hard. For the second man was certainly dead, even from that distance, it was clear he was dead, ill clad for the weather and lying facedown. It was, then, not yet eight A.M. and the dog-walker thought he knew what had happened: A youth, out partying, for this was the season to be merry, had taken too much alcohol, decided to walk home, become hypothermic and dazed, finally collapsing to sleep his last sleep in the midst of lonely Askham Bogs. The dog-walker turned to the other man, for life might not yet be extinct; his dog, too, seemed to sense the urgency and trotted beside his owner. But the urgency was wasted. Upon closer inspection, the man lying on the cold, cold ground beneath a cold blue sky was dead. Clad only in a shirt and denims and the sort of shoes joggers wear, he was clearly deceased, his arm already rising in rigor. He was youthful; the man saw a pleasant-looking blond-haired youth of about twenty summers. A life cut short, tragically short. The man plunged his hand into his pocket and took out his mobile phone and noticed his dog's reaction with interest: The dog, knowing death, curled up on the ground some distance from the body but looked at it intently. The man phoned the three nines. ". . . very dead, I'd say," he said. "Life is not threatened . . . not anymore."

The man pocketed his mobile and, calling his dog, he walked away from the body towards Tadcaster Road to await the police vehicle and the ambulance. He was standing on the pavement of Tadcaster Road when the police vehicle arrived, followed by the ambulance. They would have been dispatched separately, but had clearly met each other on the traffic-free, pre-rush-hour roads.

"Oh, he's dead, all right," the man said to the youthful-looking constable and the equally youthful-looking ambulance crew, both female. "I'm a doctor in general practice . . . life is extinct . . . you can't see him from here, but that direction," he indicated a route about ninety degrees from the road, "follow your nose, you'll see him . . . fine-looking young man. At least he was."

"Happens every winter," the constable said with a cynicism that the man thought was beyond his years. "A youth, male or female, gets a skinful of alcohol, a walk home turns out to be not the walk they planned. I knew there'd be a death in this cold snap . . . just knew it."

"Strange place to walk . . ."

"Sorry, sir? What do you mean?" The constable took out his notebook. "Can I have your name, by the way?"

"Clark, Jeremy, Dr. . . ." He gave an address in the nearby Bishopthorpe estate.

"What do I mean? Well, like you, I assumed this to be a tragedy,

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a young man with too much alcohol gets disorientated, but look where he is. . . . He is wearing only denims and a shirt—you'll see that when you view the body. Where did he come from and where was he going that he might end up in Askham Bogs?"

"That's a point, sir."

"It was freezing last night. If he left the nearest houses, which are where I live, he would have succumbed to the cold long before he reached the centre of the bogs; he probably wouldn't even have left the house in such an ill-clad manner."

"Ah . . ." The constable gazed towards the bogs, trees clad in a white frost, hoarfrost on the grass, a blue sky above.

"Just a thought," Dr. Clark said, "but it may be prudent to treat this death as suspicious until you know otherwise."

The constable reached for his collar-mounted radio and pressed the Send button. "PC three-four-seven to Control."

"Control receiving," the radio crackled.

"Location . . . opposite Askham Bogs on Tadcaster Road, ambulance crew already in attendance. . . . Death confirmed by member of the public who is medically qualified . . . death may be suspicious. C.I.D. attendance requested."

"Control. . . . Understood . . . out."

"Well, I will leave it with you." Dr. Clark shook his dog's lead. "We must be off. My surgery starts at eight A.M."

George Hennessey looked down at the youth as the SOCO camera flashed. Like the dog-walker who had found the body, Hennessey was struck by the boy's youthfulness and his good looks. Not a person who would have had any difficulty in attracting the girls, he thought, but he was now stiff with death. Soon his parents would be weeping. Dr. Mann, turban-headed, smartly dressed, approached Hennessey.

"Life is pronounced extinct at oh-eight-three-four, Chief Inspector," Mann said.

"Oh-eight-three-four." Hennessey noted the time in his notebook. "I'm sorry to have to drag you out here so early when a medical man has already pronounced death, but procedures have to be followed."

"That's perfectly all right, Chief Inspector." The police surgeon smiled. "It is my job, I am honoured to do it."

"Thank you." Hennessey smiled.

"I can find no evidence to suggest the death is suspicious from a medical point of view," Dr. Mann said. "No injuries, for example, but I do take the point that it's a long way and a strange way to have walked by himself, especially so ill clad."

"Noted," Hennessey replied.

"But whatever, he can be removed to York City Hospital for the

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post mortem if you feel one ought to be performed."

"I'd be happier," Hennessey said softly. "Both yourself and the gentleman who found him are medical men, both of you are of the opinion that this is a long way for him to come by himself from the nearest house. I'd be happier to have a thorough examination of this young corpse."

The scene-of-crime officer's camera flashed again.

"The body is that of a well-nourished male of approximately twenty years of age." Dr. Louise D'Acre spoke for the benefit of a microphone which was attached to an aluminium angle-poise arm, which in turn was attached to the ceiling of the pathology laboratory directly above the dissecting table. The body of the youth lay faceup on the table with a standard white towel placed over his coyly termed "private parts." "There is no sign of outward injury . . . but I think you are right to be suspicious of this death, Chief Inspector."

"Oh?" Hennessey, observing for the police, stood at the edge of the laboratory.

"Yes . . . you see this area of darkened skin, here down his left side?"

"Yes . . ."

"That is hypostasis. It's caused by blood settling according to gravity. It means he was placed on his left side at death or shortly after and remained in the position for at least twelve hours. It takes that length of time for blood to solidify after the heart has stopped beating. Now, if the young man was found lying facedown, as I believe he was . . ."

"He was."

"Well, in that case, it means he died elsewhere and was moved after his death."

"That is suspicious." Hennessey raised an eyebrow and glanced at Paul Fry, the mortuary attendant, who returned the glance with a smile and a shrug of his shoulders. Hennessey had time for Paul Fry; he had always found the short, rotund mortuary attendant to be a man of warmth and good humour, unlike many, nay, most other mortuary attendants that Hennessey had met. He had often wondered whether such dour men are drawn to the job because it has some macabre appeal for them or whether the job makes them sour, cynical, and humourless. But here was Paul Fry, who radiated like sunlight in this room of death and tragedy. "That and the fact he was so ill clad for the weather."

"Any identification?"

"No. . . . Nothing in his pockets—a till receipt and a credit-card receipt slip which we can trace him from, if it is his, but no wallet or similar. The till receipt is from a supermarket . . . seems to have bought food and cleaning materials—the sort of purchases a

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young man who lived alone would make, so we don't think he lives at home."

"I see . . . I think you're right to think that. A young man who buys cleaning materials is a young man who lives alone."

"We'll see." Hennessey smiled.

"Oh, take it from me." Louise D'Acre also smiled, but avoided eye contact.

"He has a small callus on his right middle finger, a classic writer's callus—a lump where the pen lodges. He was right-handed and writes with a pen as much as, or in preference to, a word processor."

"A student?"

"Possibly . . . but whatever, he used a pen a great deal. Now this is interesting . . ." Dr. D'Acre peered at the right shoulder of the dead youth.

"What have you found?"

"Come and see."

Hennessey, dressed in the same green coveralls as D'Acre and Paul Fry, walked slowly to the dissecting table.

"There," Dr. D'Acre said. "You see that?"

"It's like a small mole."

"It's a puncture point. It's caused by being injected quite roughly with a hypodermic needle, jabbed more than injected—and without the benefit of an antiseptic wipe beforehand. Druggies are covered with them, but this is the only one . . . high up on the right shoulder . . . and the callus on his right middle finger tells us he was right-handed. . . . It suggests, strongly so, that he was injected rather than injected himself. Even if he was ambidextrous, he would have difficulty injecting himself there with his left hand, even with a small syringe."

"I can see that. . . ." Hennessey mimicked the motion of injecting himself on his upper right shoulder. "He'd be more likely to put the thing into his forearm, as drug takers do."

"Mr. Fry," Dr. D'Acre turned to the mortuary attendant, "can you get a photograph of this, please? Place a ruler beside it, we'll need a scale." Dr. D'Acre and Hennessey stepped back to allow Paul Fry access to the right shoulder. "It's recent, too," D'Acre said as the camera flashed, "very recent, twenty-four hours, possibly less. I'll trawl for traces of poison, see what we find. . . . With a corpse as recent as this, traces of light toxins will still be in the bloodstream and long bones." She thanked Paul Fry as he stepped away, having taken three closeup photographs of the puncture point. She took a scalpel and placed it on the stomach of the deceased as Hennessey returned to the edge of the room.

"I won't disturb the face," she explained. "He will have relatives who will doubtless be asked to identify him. . . . But if you can't

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trace the relatives, I will remove the jaw and take a cast of his lower dentures. He can be identified by dental records, if you can find his dentist."

"Understood," Hennessey said, though he knew the procedure well, having used it many times. If the police believe they know the identity of a deceased and can find out who his or her dentist was, then dental records will confirm or refute their suspicions. Very useful in the event of much-decomposed or completely skeletal remains being found.

Dr. D'Acre drew the scalpel over the stomach, dividing the flesh with three incisions in the shape of an inverted Y. It was, Hennessey believed, called a "standard midline incision."

"Curiouser and curiouser," Dr. D'Acre said.

"What have you found?"

"Well, he had no food for at least forty-eight hours before he died. And he looks well nourished, and the supermarket receipt indicates that he was eating."

"Strange. . . ."

"Well, that's your department, not mine, but I would have to say he was kept against his will and then filled full of something. He died lying on his left side and was carried out to where he was found. I'll send samples of blood and tissue to the forensic laboratory at Wetherby. . . . You'll get the results tomorrow."

MONDAY, 3RD JANUARY. AFTERNOON.

"Sounds like Charlie." The young woman in the red T-shirt which advertised an alcoholic soft drink, a so-called "alco pop," pondered the description given to her by Detective Sergeant Yellich.

"Charlie?" Yellich glanced along the bar. The three other young women all wore the same style figure-hugging T-shirt. That brand of alco pop was clearly being promoted.

"Charlie Pimlott." The woman pulled a pint for a customer who limped up to the bar as if she knew which drink he wanted. "He comes in here a lot, near daily, hasn't been in for the last day or two."

"You give cash back, love?"

"Yes, up to fifty pounds. Customers prefer to use the bar than go to a cash dispenser. They charge a fee, a pub doesn't. If they ask for fifty pounds they get fifty. If they draw out fifty pounds from a machine a further five pounds is debited from their account. Here the fifty pounds charged to the credit card goes to the pub's account and they receive the cash. They use it to buy drink."

"I see. . . . Charles Pimlott does that?"

"Yes, a lot."

"What can you tell me about him?"

"Charlie? Not much, really."

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Yellich glanced around him. The Elm Tree was a dark dive, patronised by some very iffy-looking customers. It was still early; many seats were still vacant.

"He came in during happy hour, from three P.M. to seven . . . fifty pence off selected beers. Couldn't have much cash . . . only drank cheap beer. At seven P.M., when the price went up to normal, he'd turn and find the exit. Gabrielle is the one to ask."

"Gabrielle?"

"Girl over there. . . ." The barmaid nodded towards a worryingly thin-looking woman with dark, greying hair who stood alone at the bar in front of a pint of lager. "They were mates."

Yellich thanked the barmaid and sidled along the bar and stood next to the woman identified as Gabrielle. He showed his ID. "I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"About?" Gabrielle had a soft voice. She wore a long, dark-blue skirt and layers of dark-coloured clothing above her waist. She emitted an air of low esteem bordering on depression, so thought Yellich.

"A young man called Charles Pimlott?"

"Charlie? Not seen him for a day or two."

"What is he to you?"

"Friends. Drinking friends. I'm a lot older than he is. . . . There was nothing between us."

"You are?"

"Gabrielle Ingham." She raised her glass to her lips and drank deeply, like a man. "I do this during happy hour and then go home for a vodka or two . . . or three. . . . I get through a bottle a day." She fumbled for a cigarette and lit it with a bright orange disposable lighter. "So what has Charlie done to make the police interested in him?"

"Nothing. He's dead."

Gabrielle Ingham's knees buckled slightly. She clutched the bar and steadied herself. Yellich took her elbow but she shrugged him off.

"So you knew him?" Yellich continued after a pause.

"Aye . . . he lived with me once. . . . I mean, he rented a room off me, gave me a bit of rent."

"Did he work?"

"Employed? No . . . but work, yes." Gabrielle Ingham drew deeply on the nail. "He wanted to be a writer . . . of fiction . . . was at university reading law, said it was too tame, wanted to write . . . what did he say? 'Tell-it-like-it-is fiction' . . . 'life as it is on the streets' . . . that sort of thing. That's how I got to know him. He started to come into The Elm. . . . I mean, you can see what a dive it is, full of alcoholics like me . . . ex-cons . . . some real ducking and diving going on. Charlie came in here looking for 'copy,' as he called it." Gabrielle Ingham's voice was not just soft but almost musical. Yellich thought that near derelict as she appeared to be,

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she had clearly been in receipt of an education and had fallen from grace to become a barfly at The Elm—and had probably fallen a considerable distance.

"I warned him. . . . But did he listen?"

"Warned him?"

"He was asking questions of the wrong people. This pub may be for lowlifes like me, but there's contacts to be had if you want them. The Elm is a conduit to some very dangerous people."

Conduit. Again Yellich had the impression that Gabrielle Ingham had had an education and had fallen a long way from somewhere to have fetched up in The Elm.

"There are some dangerous people in this small city. He was wanting to talk to them for his book. What was it he said he wanted? 'Copy' . . . that was it." She took another drink of her lager, gulping it like a sailor would. "I mean, you don't do that, not to these guys. These guys are seriously heavy."

Yellich groaned. The naivety of youth, as with the youngster who went to Northern Ireland to try to make sense of the "troubles" for himself, so he could better understand them. Went hitchhiking round the province . . . eventually got into the wrong car, with his English accent, and was later found by the roadside with a bullet in his head. "Do you know to whom he was talking?"

Gabrielle Ingham shook her head, vigorously.

"Is it dangerous for you to talk?"

"Yes. They know you're a cop. . . . I could get a kicking if they think I'm giving you information. Not from anyone here, but word will get to where word will get to. . . . A lot of tourists visit York—they never see this side of the railway line."

"You've had an education, I think?" Yellich couldn't resist the question.

"I'm a nurse . . . a staff nurse. . . . Well, I have the qualifications. . . . Right now I am unemployed, on sickness benefit—long term. I won't work again. I sold my house and pay rent now . . . released a lot of money for this." She tapped the side of her beer glass. "And these." She tapped the packet of cigarettes. "I'm on the way out, forty-five years old, so I want to make it as smooth as possible. Tuberculosis," she said matter-of-factly. "Used to be called consumption. . . . Seems a more accurate name to me. . . . Folk would visit spas to take 'the cure,' knowing there was no cure, just remission now and again."

Yellich nodded sympathetically. He had heard that the disease had reemerged in the late twentieth century and had taken a toehold by the beginning of the twenty-first. Not yet of epidemic proportions, but it had a toehold nonetheless. "What specifically was Charlie Pimlott asking about?"

"The drug culture . . . the heroin trade. I mean, you don't ask questions of those people."

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"I see."

"Where can I reach you?"

"Micklegate Bar Police Station. Do you have information?"

"Might do. I have done little of use in my life, and if I am to be planted soon, I think I'd like to do at least one good thing. And Charles was a nice lad . . . he didn't deserve to be murdered so young, even if he did invite it by his stupidity."

"If it is Charlie. No positive ID yet."

"Well, his family live in the south, in the outer London area, somewhere in the Home Counties. The university will have his home address."

"Where did he live?"

"Above the greengrocers on the corner of this street. There is a small flat above the shop, they rent it out. Charlie took the tenancy a few weeks ago . . . immersing himself in the street to get authentic detail for his book. So if I do have information, who do I ask for?"

"Yellich, DS Yellich."

"I'll remember that name. We'll have to meet someplace, can't meet here and I can't be seen walking into the police station. . . . I'll be a watched woman for a few weeks now. I don't want my face carved or my ribs kicked to pieces. And that's the least I can expect."

"Understood."

Yellich left The Elm and walked down the street, pulling his collar up as protection against the chill easterly. A slight drizzle fell. The street was typical Holgate: narrow, lined with soot-blackened terraces where washing would be strung across the street on a good drying day. Not, as Gabrielle Ingham had said, the York the tourists visit. Yellich came to the greengrocers. He entered it. The greengrocer was a healthy-looking man who seemed to love fresh vegetables. His younger female assistant also looked healthy amid the carrots and potatoes and the mushrooms. Yellich had the impression that they were an item, not just proprietor and assistant, but man and wife . . . lovers at the very least.

"How can I help you, sir?" The man smiled.

"By letting me look at the flat I understand you let out, the one above the shop."

"Police?"

"Yes." Yellich showed his ID.

"If the lad's in trouble, I know nothing of it. I told him I want no drugs, I don't even let the room to smokers, but he seemed all right."

"He's not in any trouble. If he is who we think he is, he's dead."

The man jolted and glanced at the young woman, who gasped. Then he recovered his composure. "I'll get the spare key." He left the counter and returned a few minutes later with two keys strung onto a Volkswagen key fob. "The entrance is at the rear of the shop. Round the corner, down the alley. Metal staircase . . .

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Careful of the staircase, it's slippery in the wet."

Chaos. Violence. Something happened here, Yellich said to himself as he stepped across the threshold, not requiring the keys because the door of the flat was lying ajar. Inside the flat was a scene of destruction, of smashed furniture, of upturned tables and lamp stands. Yellich reached into his pocket and took out his mobile. He phoned DCI Hennessey. "Better get here, boss. If this is the youth's flat, his name was Charles Pimlott and he didn't go without a struggle."

"He definitely didn't, did he?" Hennessey looked round the small bedsit. The signs of struggle were everywhere, as if the fight that had taken place in the flat had spilled into every corner of every room—bed on its side in the bedroom, plates smashed in the small kitchen. A photograph on the mantelpiece showed a young man and woman side by side somewhere in the sun. The young man in the photograph was clearly the same young man who had been found earlier that day lying facedown in the frost in Askham Bogs. A name on a Social Security card, also on the mantelpiece, was that of Charles Pimlott. "His home address will be here somewhere. I'll contact his parents when I find it."

"Believed to come from the south," Yellich said. "I'll search for it once SOCO have finished." A camera flashed. A second SOCO officer dusted for prints with a small squirrel-hair brush. "There are no witnesses that I can find. Had a chat with the greengrocer who lets the flat . . . all he could say is that it must have happened one evening or one Sunday daytime. He lives elsewhere in the city and doesn't check on the flat, calls just once a week for his rent. The post was behind the door. The earliest postmark was four days ago, thirty-first of December. No delivery on New Year's Day, so it happened sometime before New Year's Day, if he received something in the post each day."

"Big 'if,' Yellich," Hennessey growled. "I don't think we'll pin the time of this attack by the post."

"No, boss . . . just musing. Found someone in the local pub. I think she has information . . . but she's frightened. But she also seems angry about something. I'll be surprised if she doesn't contact us. Gabrielle Ingham, by name."

TUESDAY, 4TH JANUARY. MORNING.

It never got easier. It was the walk with the next of kin, the clutching, trembling hope-against-hope attitude, the drawing back of the curtain, the wailing, the sobbing as the person lying behind the glass, dressed in bandages and, by some trick of light and shade, looking as if they are floating peacefully in space, is recognised as

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their own. In this particular case, Yellich found it easier than most, but it was still hard. The Pimlotts revealed themselves to be of the English middle class; there was a brief gasp, a slight sob, but beyond that, their emotions were contained.

"It is our son," Mr. Pimlott said.

Yellich nodded and the curtain was drawn shut.

"How did he die?" Mr. Pimlott had a trim moustache, suit; he carried an overcoat and trilby.

"We believe he was murdered." Yellich spoke softly.

"How?" Mrs. Pimlott turned to him; she was sombrely dressed in a blue two-piece.

"He was injected with heroin. We found out just this morning. The toxicology report revealed a massive amount in his system."

"But he was such a clean-living boy . . . " Mrs. Pimlott's words trailed off.

"There is no indication that he was a user," Yellich said. "The indication is that he was injected against his will. Did he tell you anything at all about what he was doing?"

"No. . . . He gave up his university course. I wanted him to follow me into the law, but he left. . . . He was doing something, he had a project he was working on, but he didn't tell us what."

"It was as if he was going to surprise us with some achievement." Mrs. Pimlott's voice was shaky. "Can we go back to the hotel, dear?"

"Yes." Mr. Pimlott squeezed his wife's hand. He turned to Yellich. "We drove up yesterday evening, booked into a hotel. As you can imagine, we didn't get a great deal of sleep. We'll have a nap and then drive home. You don't need us for anything else?"

"No. . . . Thank you."

Yellich walked the walls of the medieval city back to Micklegate Bar Police Station. He signed in and checked his pigeonhole. There was a message from Gabrielle Ingham. She had phoned requesting him to meet her at the Rose and Crown pub in Selby (opposite the Abbey), read the note. Yellich looked at the constable at the enquiry desk whose initials were on the note. "How did she sound? Drunk?"

"No, sir. Well, if anything, she was frightened. She phoned from the railway station, I heard the public-address system in the background. That's York Station. . . . I know Selby . . . there isn't a P.A. system at the station there. Train information is by way of a television screen."

"Good for you." Yellich smiled. "It's that sort of observation and local knowledge that gets results. I'll go and meet her."

Yellich walked to his office and recorded in the file on Charlie Pimlott that his identity had now been confirmed by his parents. He then drove out of York across a flat landscape the short twenty-minute drive to Selby. He parked his car in the railway-station car

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park in the shadow of the Abbey and located the Rose and Crown. It was, he found, quite different from the Elm—carpets . . . a soft, quiet, hotellike atmosphere, bar staff in smart uniform of white shirts and black waistcoats. Gabrielle Ingham, dressed in the same long skirt she had worn the day previous and in the same black jacket, sat at a table in the corner. She smoked a cigarette; a pint of beer, half consumed, stood in front of her. She smiled at Yellich, who sat next to her.

"I wasn't followed," she said. "I wouldn't be here if I was followed. They don't rate me much, anyway. I'm a slush . . . not a real threat."

"They?"

"Baruch's boys."

"You're not involved with them!"

"Not me. . . . I'm just a soak, a barfly, but I see things. . . . Baruch's moving into Holgate."

"Bit downmarket for him. From what we know, he supplies cocaine to the county set and Ecstasy to the clubbers. I've never seen him."

"No one has. They say his house is like the Tower of London: wire, guards, dogs—he's a frightened man. He's moving heroin into Holgate."

"Really?"

"He's selling it to the youth. Remember the pub yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Did you see two guys at the end of the bar, one with a beard, the other clean-shaven?"

"Didn't notice them."

"Well, they're always there. Sydney Jarvis and Henry Cooke. They were *the* villains in Holgate, selling cannabis and some duty-free tobacco, playing at it, really. Anyway, recently they were told that they were now working for Baruch . . . and they were moving heroin. They're out of their depths, they're scared. I mean, I am scared, but not like they must be."

"So, what happened?"

"What exactly, I don't know. But Charlie Pimlott was asking questions, like I told you. . . . This didn't come from me, right? I won't make a statement or give evidence."

"Okay."

"But you should talk to Cooke and Jarvis. I overheard something. . . . They had something to do with Charlie's murder—on Baruch's orders."

"Understood."

"That's all you're getting from me . . . and don't follow me out." Gabrielle Ingham stood. "I may not have been followed, but Baruch's people are everywhere. . . . Seriously. Everywhere."

❖ ❖ ❖

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Both men looked nervous. Very nervous indeed. When they were placed in separate cells at Micklegate Bar Police Station, they looked even more nervous.

"We can hold you for twelve hours without charging you," Hennessey said to Cooke. "I'll come back and see you in ten hours' time, so wait here and decide what you want to do . . . just you and your thoughts. You work for yourself or you work against yourself. We'll listen to you if you want to talk to us before your mate. I'm now going to see him and say the same thing to him. Remember, Baruch will know you've been lifted by now." Hennessey left the cell and the door was clanged shut.

TUESDAY, 4TH JANUARY. EVENING.

"If I tell you, I'm dead."

"If you don't tell us, you're dead. Baruch won't take any risks, he'll have you silenced anyway. You and your mate both."

"He's not that much of a mate." Henry Cooke stroked his beard nervously.

"Well, he may well drop you in it. We haven't talked to him yet."

"I never wanted it to go this far."

"No one ever does."

"But you don't mess with Baruch. No one ever sees him, but if he gives the word, someone dies. He hides away. . . . If he goes out, he's chauffeur-driven in a car with tinted glass. He can see out, but you can't see in."

"We know. We've wanted Mr. Baruch for a long time."

"But I've seen him."

"Do you want a lawyer present?"

"No, this is off the record, the fewer people who know what I'm saying, the better."

"It can't stay off the record."

"You won't get Jarvis to testify. Baruch's got something to hold over him . . . he's got family in Holgate. One word from Baruch and they'll all disappear. But I haven't. . . . Baruch's got nothing to hold over me."

"Keep talking."

"I want witness protection. New name. New identity."

"Only if you are a witness; if you murdered him or were part of the crime, you won't qualify . . . and you have to stand up in court and testify."

"Baruch murdered the boy."

"Go on."

"He heard the boy was asking questions. He had him brought to his house. Baruch is totally paranoid. Anyway, me and Jarvis were told to come to Baruch's house out in the Vale of York. The boy was

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there. . . . He'd been starved of food for three days to make him talk. Baruch was certain the boy knew all about his operation, but the boy knew nothing. When we got there, he was tied to a chair—a wooden upright chair—putting his fingerprints all over it. Like he was leaving you guys a present."

"Really?" Hennessey turned to Yellich, who raised his eyebrows.

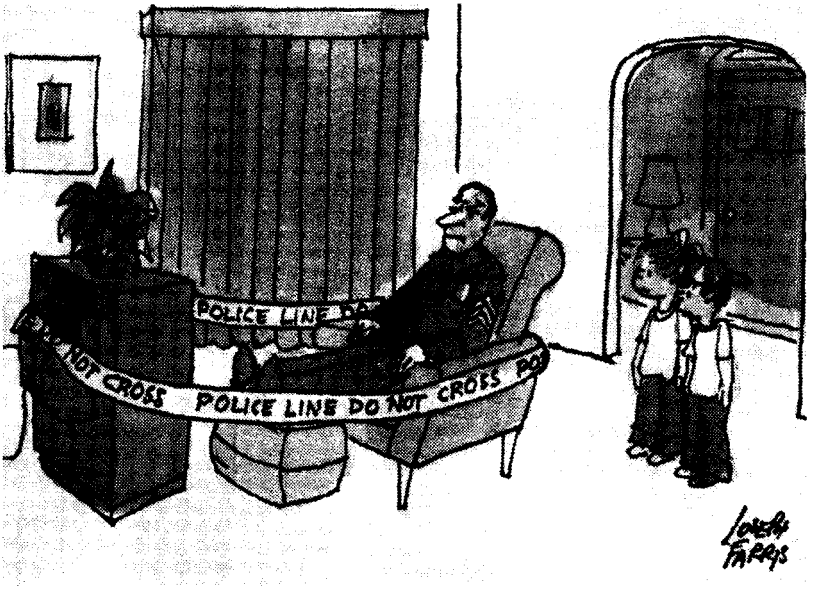
"Then Baruch produced a syringe and said to me and Jarvis, 'This is what I do if I don't like someone,' and jabbed it into the boy's arm. Then we were driven away. Didn't know what happened to the boy until yesterday."

"Better get out there," Hennessey said. "Go in force. If we can lift Charlie Pimlott's fingerprints from the chair, with the statement, that will convict him. He's slipped up."

"Only if he hasn't sent in the cleaners." Yellich stood. "We'd better move quickly."

Ten months later, Hennessey and Yellich sat in silence as a scarlet-clad judge sentenced Thomas Alfred Baruch, aged thirty-three, to life imprisonment for the murder of Charlie Pimlott, and twelve years' imprisonment for the possession of a quantity of cocaine with intent to supply. Both sentences to run concurrently.

After giving evidence at the trial at York Crown Court, Henry Cooke was ushered away in a police vehicle to begin a new life in a new location with a new identity. He lived from then on with the knowledge that from his prison cell Thomas Baruch had put a one-million-pound price tag on his head. ●



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SEDUCTION

by Maureen Tan

Though she is new to our pages, Maureen Tan is the author of two novels published by Warner Books (*AKA Jane*—hardcover 1997/paperback 1999; and *Run Jane Run*—hardcover 1999/paperback 2000), and the recently published *A Perfect Cover*, the first in a new series from Harlequin Bombshell. A second book in the Bombshell series is expected in May 2005. Her contribution to *EQMM* belongs to a genre we see little of these days—the spy story. ✝

Ian Fleming lied. Suave, handsome men are not the best spies. Nor are young, glamorous women. Not that they don't have their place, but it's usually in someone else's bed. Prone and passionate, seductive spies inspire subversive whispers and coerce confidences. But beyond the bed, it's unremarkable, middle-aged women who are the masters of the trade.

Seduction is unnecessary and irrelevant.

I was female, fifty-eight, and ordinary. Not to say that on some days I didn't feel extraordinary, mostly because I'd survived almost four decades in the intelligence business. But I didn't look glamorous or remarkable. I never had. The face and body I was born with put me well on the way to plain. Makeup and wardrobe put me half a step into homely. But I avoided stepping into ugly.

People remember ugly better than they remember pretty. And people don't trust ugly. By those standards, Professor Smith was extremely memorable and absolutely untrustworthy. He was tall, round-backed, and hairy. Mostly hairy. Wiry strands sprang, untamed and unkempt, from his head, ears, cheeks, upper lip, and chin. The hair framed a face that was dark-skinned, flat-nosed, and creased with lines that had not been formed by smiling.

Professor Smith was also brilliant. Those trying not to be racist called him a credit to his race. I, too, was black. But in the hallowed halls of Urbana State University, I was too insignificant to be considered a credit or debit to anyone's race. I was just another woman working as a handmaiden to a Great Man. The univer-

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sity's personnel office classified that position as Transcribing Typist III.

On the day I interviewed for my job, I sat in front of Professor Smith's metal desk and leaned sideways so that I could see him past the backside of an oversized computer monitor and a tangle of cords and connectors that cascaded down the back of the desk and disappeared beneath it. There were no papers on his desk, no books in his bookcase, no posters or photographs on his office's stark white walls. Professor Smith believed in the paperless society. He practiced his beliefs. Everything was stored on his computer, and his interactions with others were primarily electronic. He had no wife, no children, no lover, no friends, no students.

He couldn't type.

"My thoughts, my words are to be transcribed exactly as I speak them," Professor Smith said. "No editing. No reorganization. No commentary. Can you manage that? The last one couldn't."

The last one, I'd been told by someone in personnel, had lasted six weeks. And she'd done better than most.

"Yes, sir. I can do that. Only—"

I let a little fear creep into my voice.

Professor Smith didn't notice. He had drifted back to his monitor, was absentmindedly twisting greasy facial hair between the fingers of one hand as he tapped at the keyboard with the fingers of the other. His chronic frown deepened into a scowl.

"What?"

Still, I hesitated, intent on emphasizing an all-important lie.

"What?" he repeated. His busy fingers paused and his impatient voice was angry.

"I'm not good with computers," I said. "I'm okay to type onto them. I'm a good typist. Really fast. But those other computer things—the Internet and e-mail and spreadsheets and things—well, they confuse me."

His attention remained on the screen, which was a window to one of the most sophisticated computer systems in the world. On it, the professor was designing a low-power propulsion system—a pulsed Teflon plasma thruster that worked in the 10-to-100-watt power range. Reports coming out of the U.S. Department of Defense anticipated that, within months, Professor Smith would perfect a system that was sophisticated, elegant, and essential to the efficient operation of small satellites. Those satellites were essential to a host of military and civilian applications. Which is why the university tolerated and the government funded such an unsophisticated, inelegant, and imperfect man.

"I *asked* for a typist," he said. "I assume you're qualified if they sent you. Be here tomorrow morning. Now go away."

I left. And I wondered if, at any point, he would ask my name.

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The professor never did, which went a long way to making my job easier. I always found it difficult to kill someone I liked.

On Monday morning, I took the Route 5 bus across town to campus, just as I had every weekday for four months. I walked across the grassy central quadrangle, beneath towering oaks budding with springtime green, and between massive buildings devoted to education and research. The Goddard Aerospace Engineering Building was at the north end of the quad. It was a Gothic-style brownstone with granite steps worn smooth by 190 years' worth of footsteps, mostly white, mostly male.

Inside, the venerable structure had been retrofitted to meet the needs of modern researchers. And modern security. Energy-efficient Thermopane windows were wired into a central alarm system. Placards mounted at all the entrances warned visitors that cameras scanned the hallways. A keycard was required for access to individual laboratories and offices. The card I'd been given unlocked the small vesitibule where my desk was tucked, an interior door to Professor Smith's spacious office, and a laboratory that the professor judged wholly inadequate.

Little about me had changed since the first day the professor and I met. My hair was still styled by a beautician who violated zoning ordinances by operating a salon in her kitchen. She smoothed it down and pulled it back into a "do" that was dated and conservative. Every day, I carried the same purse with me to work. It was oversized and worn, its tapestry fabric decorated with faded pink and burgundy roses. The dresses I wore in all but the most severe weather also tended toward florals. I never wore a girdle—the fifty extra pounds I carried jiggled comfortably beneath my clothing. I made myself so ordinary and predictable that no one in the bustling college town took much notice of me. Not my neighbors. Not faculty, staff, or students. Not anyone. Especially not Professor Smith.

In the time I'd worked for him, he had expressed interest in only two things—his research and Professor Chan's laboratory. He coveted Professor Chan's large, ultra-modern laboratory space the way another man might lust after his neighbor's sexy wife. He couldn't get it out of his mind, he desired it above all things, and he was willing to do almost anything to possess it.

Professor Smith snapped his fingers as he passed my desk.

"You there," he said.

And good morning to you, too, Mr. Man, I thought as I put down my cup of coffee and followed him. He paused inside his office door and tugged his fingers through a snarl in his beard as he waited for me to seat myself at his computer. As with all the clerks who'd

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ever been employed by the professor, my work was done exclusively on his computer. I typed as he dictated. He read over my shoulder as I typed. That way, he'd once told me, I wouldn't ever be tempted to change what he'd said.

"Today's date. A memo to the dean. Regarding the pulsed Teflon plasma thruster."

I didn't start typing. The monitor's desktop was a cluttery mess, strewn with dozens of tiny icons and several open applications, so I sat frozen, apparently confused and intimidated. The professor muttered "Stupid woman," reached past me, moved his fingertips over the luminous red mouse, and opened a word-processing application. Then he dictated the announcement that I'd spent four months waiting for and described the breakthrough that I'd anticipated for weeks. Phase One of his research was complete. The virtual system worked flawlessly. The prototype could now be built.

Professor Smith told the dean that representatives from the government would soon be on campus to renew his funding. In the high six-figure range. Then he added a variation on the plea that went into every memo to the dean. Clearly, his research now merited more space. Expanding into the adjacent laboratory would be efficient, cost-effective, and something the Department of Defense would applaud. Certainly Professor Chan could be relocated to a smaller laboratory in the basement.

The dean's reply came back immediately and electronically.

"Congratulations. No."

Professor Smith sulked and raged, his triumph ruined by frustrated lust. I scurried from the office and celebrated by buying a twin pack of creme-filled cakes from the vending machine in the stairwell. My work was almost done.

On Tuesday, after the professor left for lunch, I copied his notes, calculations, and diagrams onto the laptop computer I carried in my faded tapestry purse. That night, from a coffeehouse that sold latte breve, chocolate éclairs, and Internet access, I sent the data to my superiors. There was vast profit to be made selling compact satellites equipped with low-power propulsion systems—the U. S. military would probably be one of our best customers. Thousands of miles away in my country, our best engineers and physicists were standing by. Our production plants were ready to go.

On Wednesday evening, after receiving confirmation that my transmitted data had been reviewed and was deemed complete, I went back to campus. I lingered in the shadows beneath a towering oak watching researchers leave the Goddard Aerospace Engineering Building. Finally, near midnight, I saw the tall, round-backed researcher I'd been waiting for. As usual, Professor Smith left the building without a briefcase. No paper for him. All of his research was on his computer and in his head.

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I slipped into the building, walked through the darkened vestibule that contained my desk, and unlocked Professor Smith's office. I sat at his computer and very efficiently modified his database, rendering his research useless, ensuring a marketplace where *our* product had no competition.

After that, only one task remained. I had to eliminate the man who could easily recreate the missing data. An arrogant, eccentric, self-centered black man. Brilliant, yes. But no loss to any race. I would murder Professor Smith in his home. Tonight. And make it look like an accident. Perhaps something involving electricity and water. Or toxic fumes.

An unplanned stop at my desk changed everything. I flipped on the vestibule light, intending to liberate a chocolate bar from my center drawer. That's when I saw it.

The next day was April 26. Secretaries' Day. Not a holiday I'd expected to celebrate. But there on my desk was a long-stemmed pink rose in a slender crystal vase. The card was hand-printed. "Dear Corilla. Thank you. I couldn't have managed without you."

The professor had signed it with his first name. Marvin.

I examined alternatives as I took the bus home.

I pondered possibilities as I drove my shiny Toyota to the professor's side of town.

I considered options as I walked through the darkness to his back door.

I made a decision as I picked the lock and crept through the house to his bedroom.

I sat on the edge of his bed and called his name.

"Marvin."

He opened his eyes, gasped.

My gun was pointed at his broad, flat nose.

"My God. Corilla. What—?"

There it was. Again. He knew my name. Spoke it without thinking. Damn him.

"You can die here and nobody will mourn you—"

He shrank back away from the gun, bit down hard on his hairy lower lip, and looked as if he was going to cry.

I offered him my equivalent of his pink rose.

"—or you can leave with me tonight. Travel to my country—"

He looked indecisive.

"—and we'll build you the largest, most modern laboratory facility you could ever desire."

Lust filled his eyes, softened his face. He sighed deeply.

"Yes," he moaned.

Perhaps, in the end, it is always about seduction. ●

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Art by Ron Bucalo

COLD WATERS

by Brendan DuBois

When the services were over and the people had gone home, I stood on the dock by the boathouse, in a steady rain. Out before me were the wide and dark waters of the lake where I had grown up. If I squinted my eyes some, I would see what it had been like here years ago, with fewer homes and more trees. It had been awhile since I had stood on this worn wood. The house and the land and the dock and the boathouse had once belonged to my parents. Now, after today, it all belonged to me.

I turned as I listened to the creak of wood from the dock. My wife Angie approached, wearing a dark green raincoat, hood up over her black hair. She said not a word, came up to me and slid her warm hand into mine.

We stood in the rain, watching the mist float across the still waters of the lake, and she squeezed my hand and said, "You doing all right, Pat?"

"Doing okay," I said.

She leaned into me. "It must have been wonderful living up here."

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I smiled at the memory. "Sure was. Except . . ."

Angie turned to me. "Except what?"

I shrugged. "Except one summer, when I was twelve."

"What happened then?"

I turned back to the gray waters. "It wasn't so wonderful anymore."

"That's something," Angie said. "When things aren't so wonderful. Guess it explains why you never liked coming up here that much."

"Yeah," I said.

She squeezed my hand again, staying quiet, as she often does when she knows my mind is working way at the back, like a miner in a deep cave, probing and tapping. I squeezed her hand back, said, "I think I owe you more."

"You sure?"

I took a breath. "Yeah, I'm sure. I think it's time."

She squeezed my hand again, spoke quietly. "Only if you want."

"I guess I want," I said. I went into the boathouse, pulled out a wooden bench, and sat down. I patted the worn wood next to me and Angie sat down, too. Behind us oars, paddles, life jackets, and other odds and ends hung from wooden pegs. Shelves were filled with old paint and varnish cans, worn-out batteries, and other debris from years of boating on this lake.

"Thanks," she said. "My ankles are killing me. So. What do you want to tell me?"

"Everything," I said.

Brendan DuBois is better known for hard-edged thriller novels and stories than for the intriguing sort of cozy he's produced for us this time out. He's a two-time winner of the Private Eye Writers of America's Shamus Award and he penned two heart-pumping stand-alone thrillers, *Resurrection Day* (Putnam 1999) and *Betrayed* (St. Martin's 2003). His latest novel, *Buried Dreams* (St. Martin's) features series sleuth Lewis Cole. ¶

That summer Patrick Dow was twelve, and even at that age, he knew how special it was, living by a lake. He was an only child, with a second-floor bedroom whose large windows oversaw the wide cove that his home was on, at Lake Woodward. His parents' bedroom was down at the other end of the hall, the two rooms separated by a spare room his mom, a children's book illustrator, used for an office. His dad owned a restaurant in town and tried to spend a lot of evenings and most weekends at home, either working on the lawn or the dock or taking the three of them out on a motorboat ride across the wide waters of Lake Woodward. He also belonged to a couple of civic groups, including the town's planning

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board and historical society. The town was the same name as the lake, Woodward, and it was pretty small, with a cool downtown that had a couple of ice-cream shops and a video-game parlor.

But living on the lake, there was always more fun—more things to see and do on the lake than anywhere downtown. Pat was right there by the lake when it iced over, and he could skate across the wide coves. He was there in the fall, when the bright leaves were so colorful that when the sun was right, even the water was red and orange and yellow. And he was there in the spring, when the ice melted and the otters played among the ice floes, the mergansers came back, and the first green buds came to life.

Then there was the summer, long and warm and glorious. At the start of this particular summer, before the bad things began, Pat woke up in the middle of the night, comfortable and warm and safe in his bed. The day before had been the last day of school, and he had gone to bed tingly and happy with anticipation of the months of vacation that stretched before him like an endless journey. The idea of school again, in the fall, was as distant to him as trying to imagine what it would be like when he finally got his license and could drive. No, what was ahead for him was months of swimming and fishing and canoeing, pickup baseball games on the town common with his buddies from school, ice cream and barbeques and fireworks, and no homework, not ever, not for a long time to come.

He rolled over in bed. He wondered what had woken him. Sometimes there were noises coming from Mom and Dad's bedroom, and he was old enough to know what was going on, though he didn't see what the big fuss was all about. But the house seemed quiet. He looked out the windows. A half-moon was up in the night sky, lighting up the waters in the cove. He could hear the chatter of crickets and the low rhythm of frogs bellowing. Out on the main lake, there came the haunting screech of a loon, calling out to its mate. He shivered. Maybe that noise had woken him. He shivered again, feeling the wind move across his hair and watching it make the drapes move against the wall.

There. That noise. A frantic, low *hoo-hoo-hoo* of an owl out there, hunting. It gave him a tingly feeling that while he was safe and warm in bed, something out there was being killed. He lay awake, waiting and listening, until he couldn't hear anything except the soft murmur of a boat engine moving slowly out onto the lake waters. That was when he fell asleep—and a few hours later was when it began, when the first body was found, floating in the cold waters.

In the morning, his mom was downstairs in the small dining room, looking out to the main lake, binoculars in her hands. His dad stood next to her, yawning. "What's going on?" Dad asked.

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"I see lights, over there near Twombly Cove."

"So?"

"Red lights. And blue ones, too."

Dad stood next to her, quite close. Pat said, "Police? Is that it?"

"And the Marine Patrol," Mom said, her voice quiet.

"Let me see," Pat said, and his mom turned and was going to say something when his dad gently took the binoculars from her hands and passed them over to Pat.

"Henry," she said sharply.

"It's all right," he said. "Let the boy look."

Pat took the binoculars and brought them to his face. He adjusted them to fit his eyes and saw the low-slung Boston Whaler of the Marine Patrol, close to shore, two conservation officers standing by the gunwales, looking over the side. A police cruiser and ambulance were by the low brush on the shoreline, near a vacation cottage that was still boarded up. He could barely make out the people by the shore, who looked like they were waiting for the conservation officers to do something.

"My turn, sport," Dad said.

He gave up the binoculars to his dad's strong hands, and Dad looked out to the lake water. Mom stood still, arms crossed. Dad sighed.

"What is it?"

"A body," Dad said. "They're pulling out a body."

Mom put a hand to her face. Pat couldn't help himself; he smiled. Maybe he could get down to his canoe and with some serious paddling, make it out there while—

It was as if she could hear his mind working. She turned quickly and said, "Don't even think about it."

"Hunh?" Pat asked.

"I said, don't even think about going out there. You're staying right here, mister."

"But I was going to go fishing before breakfast, Mom, c'mon."

Dad lowered his binoculars. "Tell you what, bud. You can go fishing, but don't leave our cove. All right?"

"Dad, I was thinking about—"

Dad said gently, which was sometimes scarier than when he raised his voice, "Not negotiable, Pat. Our cove or noplace."

He nodded. Dad handed the binoculars over to Mom, who shook her head and went into the kitchen.

Later in the morning, he was out in his canoe, fishing. The canoe was bright red and was comfortable, with two seats made of woven leather strips. At his feet was his tackle box, and in his hands was his Shakespeare fishing pole, hanging over the port side. It was still early in the morning and he hadn't had breakfast

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yet, but that was fine. It was fun to be out on the water by himself, before the water-skiers and the party boaters and everybody else got up and started playing in the waters of Lake Woodward. The cove he was in was a small one, compared to other big coves in the lake. Including his house, there were three houses in this cove—meaning people who lived here year-round—and four cottages that were only opened up after Memorial Day, and were rented by the week or the month.

But even with the homes and the cottages, the cove was quiet. It was still pretty early. When he had first started drifting along the shoreline, faint wisps of mist had hung there, like see-through shower curtains, but now, the mist had gone. He had cast and recast his lure over the past hour, slowly drawing the fishing line back in, listening to the faint *click-click-click* of the reel doing its work. He looked over to his house. Mom was probably upstairs working while Dad was probably getting ready to head into town, to the restaurant. By now the canoe had drifted out near the waters of the main lake. He looked over at the cove where the Marine Patrol boat was still moored, and the lights of the police cars and the ambulance still flashed.

Another look to the house. Mom and Dad could be looking at him right now, or they could be busy. . . . Would it hurt to paddle over, just a little bit, toward the other cove? He lifted up his paddle and then heard Dad's voice again, in his head: *Not negotiable, Pat. Our cove or noplace.* And the tone of Dad's voice told him everything he needed to know.

He started paddling the canoe deeper into the cove, and away from the lights and the boat and the body that intrigued him so. He had another half-hour or so of fishing left to do, and even though he hadn't caught a thing, he was enjoying it so, on his first real day of vacation.

After dinner that night, Mom and Dad went out to the rear deck, and he joined them, working a crossword from a puzzle book. He was doing crosswords now that were designed for adults, not kids like him, and he liked being able to solve the tougher puzzles.

Mom and Dad talked to each other as he held the pencil and puzzle book in his hand, and he kept quiet. Sometimes they talked and sort of forgot he was there, if he kept his mouth shut and didn't raise any attention.

Mom said, "You got that planning-board meeting tomorrow night?"

"Yeah, I do," Dad said, his voice sounding tired.

"The Oyster Bay project," she said. "Am I right?"

Dad shook his head and took a sip from his after-dinner glass of wine. "Yeah, you're right. Stupid fools. This is a lake. There ain't no

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oysters in there. That's what you get when you deal with flatland developers."

Mom smiled. "Don't be harsh, Henry. You used to be a flatlander, too. And you've got lots of family down south—especially in and around Boston—who might take offense to that."

"Then let them," Dad said, his voice just a bit loud. "Guys like these developers come up here, don't appreciate the lake . . . it's going to be a problem."

"Oh?"

He looked out to the lake, and Pat kept his pencil still, wondering what was going on.

Dad shook his head. "These developers . . . we've tried everything, by the book and not by the book, to block and delay, and it looks like it doesn't matter anymore. No matter how long we've lived here, no matter how much we love this lake and want to protect it, there's not much we can do. They've got the funding lined up, and they're ready to tear up half of the most undeveloped lake in the state, for fifty new homes. Can you believe that? Fifty new goddamn homes."

"Henry," Mom said. "Your language."

"Oh, sorry. Well." His dad turned to Pat and said, "How goes it, sport?"

"Not bad."

"Running out of puzzles?"

Pat smiled. "Not today, that's for sure."

He asked, "How was your fishing?"

He shrugged. "Okay."

"Catch anything?"

"Lots of weeds."

Dad laughed. "Well, at least you tried. Going out tomorrow?"

"Probably," Pat said. "Can I go out to the other coves?"

"Sure," Dad said. "I don't see why not. Just be careful."

Mom said quietly, "Anything new about that body they found this morning?"

Pat kept still again, hoping that his dad wouldn't say something like, "Well, we'll talk about it later," or, "No, nothing," but Dad pulled through and said, "Yeah, Chief Poulton came over, needed some sandwiches 'to go' for his folks. Guy they pulled out was old, maybe in his eighties. No identification on him. Dressed in just a pair of pants and a T-shirt. And the chief said, well, that the medical examiner found something strange when he looked at the body."

"What's that?" Mom asked.

Dad looked over at Pat, who was desperately pretending to be working on a puzzle.

"The old guy's lungs," he said.

"What about them?"

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"They didn't have any water in them."

"So? They didn't have any water and . . . oh. Now I understand."

They were silent for a moment, and Pat couldn't stand it. "Dad?"

"Yeah?" His father lowered his wineglass.

"What . . . what does it mean, what you said there? That there wasn't any water in his lungs."

Dad looked at Mom, and Mom looked at Dad, and then Dad said quietly, "It means the old man didn't drown."

Pat looked at his parents, and Mom went on. "It means, dear, that the poor man died, and then somebody put him in the lake."

"Oh," Pat said, the pencil in his hand feeling useless, the puzzle book no longer attractive. He was fascinated by what Mom and Dad had just said, but knew if he said any more, they would shut him out of any other news. "Wow," he said. "That's pretty strange."

Dad nodded. "Yep. Pretty strange."

And two days later, another body was found, at the other end of the lake, at Pinkham's Cove. The cove was way on the south side of the lake, a place that Pat had only canoed to once before. Since it took three hours to paddle over there in a straight shot, with three hours for a return trip, it didn't leave much time to catch one's breath and do some fishing. The cove was clustered with small islands with tall pines, stretches of swamp, and boulders barely awash from the lake water that caught unwary speedboats roaring through. Pat had never liked Pinkham's Cove, and when Dad had told him about the body being found there, he shivered. It made sense.

Dad was late for dinner, but made up for it by bringing steamed lobsters from the restaurant for the three of them to eat. Again, they were out on the back deck, cracking open the shells and dipping the lobster meat into drawn butter, when Dad announced that another body had been found.

"Stranger and stranger," Dad said. "Another old person this time, but a woman. Wearing only a cotton nightgown. That's it. No identification or anything else."

Mom gently wiped at a drop of butter that was on her chin. "I don't like it, Henry. I don't like it at all."

Dad shrugged. "Who does? Sounds like some wacko out there, dumping bodies in the lake for no reason. And the funny thing is, neither of them seemed to have any trauma. It looked like they died naturally."

"The lungs," Pat said.

"What?" Dad asked.

"The lungs," Pat said. "Was there any water found in the lungs?"

Dad ate another piece of lobster. "Nope. It looks just like that poor old guy they found two days ago."

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Mom looked at Dad and then at Pat. "You . . . you better stay in our cove from now on," she said. "Until this gets straightened out."

"Mom!" he protested. "Our cove is so small, and the best fishing is out on the main lake, and I haven't caught hardly anything this summer yet!"

Dad started to speak, but Pat kept on going. "I'm good enough to go fishing by myself, I should be able to—"

"Pat," Dad said.

He stopped. Dad was using that tone of voice again. Pat lowered his head, the lobster not tasting that great. "Okay," he said.

The day after the second body was found, Mom drove down to Boston to visit her mother and other relatives in the area. She had also gone down the week before, and both times, Pat had begged off going down with her. Pat had been down to Boston exactly three times to visit Mom's side of the family, and except for side trips to see the Red Sox play at Fenway Park, he hadn't enjoyed it much. Boston was too big and loud and noisy, and Mom's relatives were a loud bunch, too. There were uncles and aunts and cousins whose names he could hardly keep straight, and most of them worked for the city in the police department or fire department or public works or other places like that. They drank a lot of beer and talked about the job, though the way they pronounced it was "The Job." Every time he visited them, he could hardly wait to get back home to the quiet of the lake.

Mom had asked him to come along, but when he had put up a fuss, surprisingly enough, she hadn't argued back. He'd planned to get some fishing in while Mom was away, but the day started off with rain, and so he went to Dad's restaurant. It was right in the center of town and was called Hanson's Pub and Grub, and Pat spent most of the time in the kitchen. He put on a white apron and helped empty the large automatic dishwasher of silverware and plates. Dad didn't pay him in cash, but he did pay him in restaurant credit, so he could stop by every now and then for a Coke or a burger.

Today it was humid, with the rain falling steadily, and the restaurant was pretty busy. He wiped his hands on the apron and went looking for Dad, to see if he could take a break, and Dad was in his upstairs office, talking to some guy. The guy didn't seem happy.

Pat could barely make out what the two of them were saying. The guy had a loud voice, but Dad was speaking real low, low enough that Pat couldn't catch what he was saying.

The guy said, " . . . should be on the agenda for a final vote, and you know it . . ."

Dad said something and the guy shot back: " . . . just another delaying tactic, and you know it. That development's going in . . ."

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Another murmur from Dad, and the guy's voice changed a bit, as if he was pleading: " . . . screwy going on, and the funding just might . . ."

He strained and strained his ears, but he couldn't make out what Dad was saying. He could have moved in closer, but the thought of Dad and the guy catching him, well, he didn't like that at all. Pat wiped his hands on the soiled apron and went back to the dishwasher.

The day after he saw the man in Dad's office, he walked by his Mom's office, where she was sitting in a special chair that could be raised and lowered with lots of switches and levers. Mom had warned him never to touch that chair, and after one unfortunate incident two years ago that ended up with Mom falling backwards onto her butt, he had always listened to her.

Today she was hunched over her large artist's board, sketching what looked like a toad piloting a rocketship. Sometimes he liked to watch her work, watch how she sketched something out based on the writer's story, and if Mom was in a goofy mood, she would sometimes make a quick sketch of him or Dad. Two of those sketches were framed and were hanging on the wall, and that was the neatest part of the office. Other sketches were there as well, all of them showing Lake Woodward. Everything else was a pile of papers, boxes, books, folders, sketches, and overflowing wastebaskets. Dad called Mom "Miss Pack Rat of Lake Woodward" and Mom laughed and never disagreed. Every other week, Mrs. Beaudoin came in to clean the house, and she was forbidden to touch anything in Mom's office. There had been another unfortunate incident last summer, when Pat had refused to clean his bedroom. After all, he had said, Mom's room was messy. Why couldn't his room be messy? And with that, Dad had taken the canoe out and chained it to a tree. Pat went to work that afternoon cleaning his bedroom, and the canoe had reappeared at the dock the very next day.

Today when he stopped in to see what she was doing, Mom folded her arms and looked out at the lake before she turned to him and smiled. He walked over, and she rubbed his head. "Going out fishing today, bud?"

"Don't know," he said, now realizing that he was beginning to hate to have his head rubbed. "There might be thunderstorms coming through. I don't want to get wet."

"Sure," she said, and then she hugged him with her strong arms, and he didn't know what to say. But Mom just smiled and said, "You're a lucky boy, to live right here. You know that, don't you?"

"Yep."

"And your Dad works very, very hard to make sure you have this nice place."

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"I know."

"Good," she whispered, squeezing him again. "Don't you ever forget it."

Dusk on the cove, and Pat was miserable. He had forgotten to bring bug repellent and half the time he was fishing he was slapping at either mosquitoes or black flies. He knew he could have paddled back in, but Mom sometimes had the bad timing to grab him when he came back to dock, to do the dishes or mow the lawn or weed the garden. So he stayed out, casting and recasting, and didn't catch a thing.

He scratched at the back of his neck, saw one of those low-slung and powerful fishing boats out on the main lake. Those boats were mean-looking, with big, booming engines that could get them to the other side of the lake within ten minutes, when it would take him three hours to do it in a canoe. There were two guys in the fishing boat and they waved at him. He waved back.

Pat drew in the line, waited, drew it in again, and then—

Something tugged at the line. He waited, then pulled in tight. Something seemed to fight against the line and he tugged again, and the tip of the fishing pole bent over. Finally!

He reeled in the line slowly and steadily, feeling his heart thump just a little bit. He wondered what he might have caught. Pickerel, maybe, or a bass. Or a trout! Just a few seconds more, and he leaned over the side of the canoe, looked into the clear waters, and then—

Sat down.

"Damn it," he whispered, knowing that while sound carried out on the water, he had said it quiet enough so Mom couldn't have heard him. He shook his head and pulled in the line, holding up his trophy for the world to see: a broken pine branch with soggy needles, which had probably sunk to the bottom a week or two ago. He undid the line and the hook and was going to throw the damn thing back, and then, thinking better, dropped it on the bottom of the canoe. If he threw it back into the water, there was a chance he might catch it again tomorrow. Or next week. Or even next month.

God. Next month. A whole month could go by and he'd still be stuck in this cove, while the grownups tried to figure out what was going on with the lake and those dead people. He had read the newspaper stories about the whole thing and there was nothing there that Dad hadn't said before: an old man and an old woman, not from around here (since nobody had reported their grandpa or grandma missing), and who had been dumped in the water after they had died.

A tickle at the back of his neck and he slapped back there again. He was hungry and tired and there were probably a good half-

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dozen fresh bug bites on his neck, arms, and legs. Time to head back in. He reeled in the lure and snapped it in place on his fishing pole, and gently placed it down on the canoe's bottom, next to his trophy pine branch. He picked up the paddle, started heading back home, and then he let his strokes slow down. Something didn't seem right.

Mom and Dad were by the boathouse, and it looked like . . . well, it looked like they were arguing. Arms were being waved around and Dad's face seemed red, and Mom looked like she was about to cry.

Pat stopped paddling. What to do?

Another slap on his arm. The bugs were getting worse, and he bent down and resumed his paddling, not liking what was going on there, not liking it at all, but maybe it had been his imagination, for when he got to the dock, they were both smiling. Dad helped him tie off the canoe and Mom helped him with his tackle box, and they both laughed at him when he showed them the pine branch he had caught.

"I don't know why you're laughing," he said. "I've got feelings, too, you know."

And Mom and Dad had laughed again, with Mom kissing the top of his head, and Dad rubbing his shoulder.

Early morning, in bed. He yawned and stared up at the white plaster ceiling. His arms still itched but all in all, he had slept okay. Sometime during the night, another noise had woken him, but it had just been the murmur of a boat engine, that's all, out there doing some night fishing or something. He looked over at the digital clock. Just after four-thirty in the morning, and look how light it was out there! He scratched his arms and rolled over, thinking that maybe he'd get back to sleep and get up with Mom and Dad at six-thirty, get some more fishing in before breakfast and—

He rolled over again. Mom and Dad. They were asleep, no doubt about it. And he was awake. And if he was very, very quiet, he could probably sneak out and get at least ninety minutes of fishing in . . . And if he timed it right, well, okay, he'd be breaking the rules a little bit, but nobody would know. He could go out to one of the other coves for at least an hour, try fishing someplace else, and maybe he'd stop getting skunked.

Who would know?

Nobody, that's who.

He got slowly out of bed, and dressed as quietly as possible.

A few minutes later, he was down at the dock, yawning, but feeling a little bit excited about what he was doing. He put his fishing pole and tackle box in the canoe, got in, and shrugged on a life jacket. He undid the two lines that held the canoe to the dock, and then gently pushed away from the dock with his paddle. He

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smiled. He had been bugging Mom and Dad for over a year now to get him a small boat with an outboard motor, and this morning, he was glad they hadn't come through for him. It would have been hard to sneak out with an outboard churning along.

He dug in the paddle, looked out at the lake water, which was flat and still. Glass water, Dad always called it. He paddled slowly, making hardly any noise, as he slowly made his way out onto the main lake. It was cool, and he had on shorts, T-shirt, and a thick gray sweatshirt. He checked his wrist watch. Just before five A.M. When he got to the cove he was heading to—Walker's Cove—he'd stay there just an hour. Sixty minutes, and then he'd make his way back.

Pat looked around at the shoreline of the lake, at the homes and docks and moored boats. He shivered. It looked as if he was the only one out at this hour, and he was glad. The Fourth of July weekend was just two weeks away, and by then, the lake got busier, the waters got crowded with other boats. Now it seemed that the lake belonged to him, and him only.

He rounded the point of land that jutted out into the lake, saw his own house and dock disappear from view, and thought about Mom and Dad, safe and warm in their bed, and he shivered again, feeling that tingly feeling that came when he knew he was doing something he shouldn't. Just sixty minutes, he thought. Just one hour.

He checked his watch. A half-hour, and already he had caught two trout! They had struck his line in the very first minutes of fishing, and he almost laughed out loud, it felt so good to have the fish take the lure so hard and fast. He had cast out his line, had slowly drawn it back in on the reel, and then came the sudden tug. He fell into his tactic of waiting a few seconds, and then pulling the line taut, setting the hook into the fish. Then came the tension, the tip of the rod bending over, as he reeled in the fish. He had grown used to the feel of the line, being able to sense how heavy the fish was before he brought it into his canoe. And this time was no different; he had figured each trout would be about three pounds. He could actually see each of the trout emerge from the darkness of the lake water, wiggling furiously, trying to get away. And each time, he went through the motions of wrapping it up: scooping the fish up with a small hand-held net, removing the hook—these two times were relatively easy, just pushing the hook out—and then releasing the trout back into the lake water. The second time he had done it this morning, he wondered if the trout could talk to each other, and if maybe they told stories about being brought up into the place of no water, where it was so hard to breathe and strange creatures captured and released you.

Pat checked his watch. Just a few minutes more, and that was all. He didn't want to risk getting caught out here in this cove, or

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the channel. If he cast out his line one more time, he'd have plenty of time to paddle back to his home cove without any problem. This cove was studded with boulders and there were only two cottages on the shoreline, and it didn't look like either of them was open yet.

He flicked the fishing rod, saw the tiny plop in the water as the lure went in. He slowly reeled in the line, the faint sound of the *click-click-click* almost a comfort as the line came in. Out on the main lake came the faint, mournful call of a loon. He wanted to see if he could make out the familiar shape riding out there on the smooth water, and as he turned to look, there was—

—a tug. That's all. A tug. He pulled the line in and it held, and the front of his rod bent over. He started reeling in and man, did the fishing pole bend over! It felt like he had the biggest trout ever at the end of his line, and he kept on reeling the line in, and then he noticed suddenly that it was wrong.

Everything was wrong.

He stopped, his hands suddenly shaking. Pulling in a fish like this, especially one that seemed really big, the line would tense and relax, tense and relax, as the fish fought to get free. But he didn't get that feeling here, not at all. He took a breath, suddenly wished that Dad was coming around the point of land in the powerboat, looking for him. For he knew right away that he didn't have a fish on the end of his line, and he knew that he hadn't gotten caught up on a snag or piece of branch.

He took a deep breath. He knew what he had caught, what was there at the other end of the line.

What now?

What if he started screaming, or dragged in what was at the end of the line? What then, if people found out? He'd be grounded for the rest of his life.

He kept ahold of the pole with one hand and fumbled around in his tackle box with the other. There. His knife. Using his teeth, he unsnapped the top of the leather scabbard and managed to get the knife out by shaking it to the bottom of the canoe, where it made a heck of a rattle. His hand shaking again, he picked up the knife and nearly broke a thumbnail getting it open. He took the knife and brought it up the strained, taut fishing line, and—

Waited. His legs were now trembling and a scared little voice inside of him was yelling, *Cut the line! Cut the line! What are you waiting for?*

He leaned over the side a bit to look into the dark, cold waters of the cove. Nothing. The line just extended into the darkness. He could cut the line now and go home, but he would never know. Never know exactly what it was he had caught. Oh, he had a good idea, but he remembered something his Dad had said about being scared. Yeah, that's it. It wasn't the things we knew that scared us,

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Dad had said, but the things we didn't know. The unknown was always scarier than the known. He took another deep breath, wondering if that would make his chest stop hurting.

Dad always knew. Always. He balanced the open knife on his knees as he continued drawing the line in, reeling it in slowly now, not with the happy and triumphant feeling he got from nailing a perch or a bass or a trout. He wanted to look away and he couldn't, and he did all right, he really did all right, until the shape came into focus, too quickly into focus, and before he could take the open knife to the fishing line, a man's old and puffy face was looking up at him through the lake water, the hook from his line caught on a T-shirt. The sight of it scared him so that he almost forgot to cut the line, but cut it he did. He then pulled his pole back, dropped the knife onto the bottom of the canoe, and waited.

Would the body float up? Would it sink back down?

There was the softest, gentlest thud as something bumped into the side of the canoe, near his legs, and the nausea came through so fast, he thought he would throw up.

The loon hooted again.

He couldn't look at the water. He lowered his pole, picked up the paddle, and slowly started paddling away. The cold water was flat and still, but it no longer looked inviting. It looked slick, slimy, polluted.

He paddled home as fast as he could, stopping a couple of times to wipe the tears away, his slick hands now slippery on the canoe paddle, refusing to look back at where he had been.

So there I was, in the shelter of the old boathouse. Angie squeezed my hand and said, "I knew where this story was going, the moment you started."

"You did?"

"Yes, I did," she said. "When you started out about the bodies being found in the lake . . . you poor boy, I knew you would find one. Just knew it.

"Guess I'm a lousy storyteller," I said.

"Did you . . . did you tell anybody?"

"Eventually."

"Who?"

I looked at her concerned face. "You. I went back home, and later that day, the body washed up on a beach near that cove. I didn't say a word. And that was the last one that summer. Just the three."

We sat quietly for a moment, and Angie said, "And I think I know something else, too."

I squeezed her hand. "Go ahead."

"Your dad . . . he was behind it, wasn't he? The bodies being

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dumped in the lake. I don't know why, but it had something to do with your dad. And the development that was being planned."

I kept her hand in mine and said, "The development never got built that summer, or any summer after that. I didn't know the whole story, but I guess the financing was pretty shaky. And when the news of this pristine lake in New Hampshire being a dumping place for bodies got out . . . the finance people pulled out. And the development collapsed."

"I see," Angie said.

"Yeah," I said, looking out at the waters of the lake. "And that's not the only thing that collapsed."

"What do you mean?"

I shrugged. "The rest of that summer . . . I pretty much stopped fishing. I was always scared that another body would come up. Mom and Dad . . . there was a coolness there. Hard to explain, but even as a kid, I could tell something had changed between them. They still loved each other and it was still a happy home, most times, but there was a . . . a coolness there, a politeness. It was as if the lake had changed as well. It was no longer a place of peace."

Angie said, "You think your mom found out, then, what your dad was doing."

I gave her hand another squeeze, stood up, and went to the rear of the boathouse. Reached up to a shelf that held old paint cans, paintbrushes, and other collected debris. There was a loose panel of wood there, where I reached in. I took out something and went back to Angie. Her face seemed to pale as she examined the three pieces of cardboard, each with a long piece of stiff wire at the end.

"Here," I said. "I found this two years after that summer."

"Is this . . . I mean . . . Pat . . ."

I took her free hand again. "Yes, that's what they are. Toe tags, from a morgue. From the three bodies dumped in the water. You said, did things change when my mom found out what Dad was doing. No, it was the other way around. I think my dad found out what my mom was doing. My pack-rat mom, who couldn't throw anything away."

I reached over and took the toe tags from Angie's hand. "I never had the nerve to find out the whole story, but I think I knew what happened. Mom was just as concerned as Dad was about the development coming in, and she knew Dad couldn't do much more on the planning board. But she could. You remember when I told you that she had lots of relatives in the Boston area working in the police and fire departments, and other places?"

Angie just nodded. I went on. "One other place was the county morgue. Best I figured, Mom was able to . . . well, bodies of elderly people who died alone, with no relatives. They'd be buried in a

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pauper's grave somewhere. I guess . . . well, she had a plan. She'd go down there alone and come back . . . not alone."

Angie whispered, "How horrible."

"Yeah," I said, letting the old toe tags drop to the floor. "How horrible. And the most horrible thing was . . . it was that in trying to save the lake and what it meant for our family, Mom did exactly the opposite. Which is why I haven't been back here in years, hon."

Angie looked to me. "It's our place now." And she moved her raincoat about so that I could see the swell in her belly that meant the start of something new and wonderful and terrifying for both of us.

"True," I said. "But the memories . . ."

And my wife rubbed her belly. "We could start new ones, you know. It wasn't the lake's fault. We could move here, start something new, something wonderful. We could, you know."

I didn't say a word. I just looked out at the cove, imagined a young boy, twenty years earlier, paddling like mad, trying to get home, home to a place of safety. Oh, you poor kid, I thought.

"Pat," Angie said.

I cleared my throat. "Look," I said. "It looks like it's going to stop raining." ●

"These murder weekends take me back to my youth—stately homes, butlers . . . I did it, in the library, with the chambermaid. . . ."

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My Aunt Gloria's Legacy

by David Williams

The following story by David Williams is, as far as we know, the last story he wrote before his death in 2002. Like all his fiction, it is elegantly written and full of his sharp but kindly observations of his fellow men. The last Williams novel, *Practise to Deceive*, was published by Allison & Busby (U.K.) in 2003, and features series character DCI Merlin Parry. Not published in the U.S., but it can be purchased on the Web. ¶

I have made the decision to do away with Aunt Gloria twice in my life. The first time was when I was eight years old, but the execution was baulked. The second was quite recently. I am now thirty-six, which I mention to demonstrate just how long the period was when, despite a continued smouldering stern resentment, I succeeded in stemming a justified and singular murderous urge.

I mean, I have never ever wanted to liquidate anyone else.

Despite my initial failure, it would be unfair to dismiss the seriousness of my intention that first time. I wasn't a particularly precocious or rebellious child, and certainly not, in the ordinary way, even remotely a homicidal one. I was certainly curious and inventive. At that age, understandably, I might well have lacked the tutored ingenuity and facility to pull off the deed.

I do still clearly remember what precipitated and justified my resolve at the time. Aunt Gloria had grossly insulted my mother, whom I adored. Like Sir Lancelot, my then favourite fictional character, I took an affront to my fair lady as a challenge.

To explain the circumstances: I had taken it upon myself to dye the curtains of the dormer window in the garret bedroom I always occupied when we visited Uncle Wilfred and Aunt Gloria. Their substantial country house was near Stratford-upon-Avon, in the

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pretty Shakespeare country, and twenty miles south of Uncle Wilfred's factory in the industrial area that centres on Birmingham. The curtains were small, like the window they covered. They were also fairly old and faded. It had seemed to me that turning them from a boring pale green into a vivid, unmissable scarlet would be a service to my hosts as well as a pleasing surprise.

I had bought the packet of dye on impulse for sixpence in the local village shop. A specific use for my purchase had not suggested itself to me until I was on the way home. In any event, at the moment of revelation it seemed an admirable purpose, and a small price to pay for such a desirable transformation—as well as a good deed deserving gratitude.

After all, it had been my sixpence.

The instructions on the packet of dye seemed simple enough. All you needed besides hot water was a bucket and a pair of rubber gloves. The first accessory I borrowed from Uncle Wilfred's garage, the second, more stealthily, from the kitchen. Fortunately, my aunt's daily help had small hands.

It was simply unfortunate that my juvenile effort inadvertently and often patchily altered the hue of many other things besides the curtains. These included two towels in the small bathroom on the same floor as my room; a section of the newish, light-blue carpet in the corridor; the yellow coverlet on my bed; a surprisingly large section of wallpaper; inexplicably, bits of the corridor ceiling, as well as the fronts of the shirt and short grey trousers I had on at the start; and, after I had discarded those, my bare chest and my underpants. The exercise had been completed without interruption on a sunny July afternoon when my aunt was hosting a tennis party on the other side of the house. I had been relying on the sunshine to dry the curtains quickly outside my window, which it did, but not before they had turned the terra cotta tiles there what I have to admit was a hideous and permanent shade of vermilion.

For my own part, I was hurt beyond measure when my furious aunt later bawled me out to a degree quite disproportionate to the size of my mistake—which, after all, had begun as a well-intentioned good deed. But much worse than that was my later overhearing the outrageously scathing words she addressed to my saintly mother on the subject.

"Digby is an uncontrolled, ill-mannered little horror," she asserted: The actual words are implanted in my mind. "It's entirely your fault, Phyllis, for indulging him in every possible way. You should keep him under control. Not only do you demean yourself by giving him free rein, you let down the memory of our dear Arnold." I should explain that Arnold Betcher was my dead father.

"You simply have to pull yourself together," she went on merci-

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lessly, "behave like a responsible mother, not a scared, scatterbrained, wimpish shopgirl." By now she had reduced my sensitive mother to floods of tears. Her weeping had been clearly audible through the closed double doors to the drawing room before I threw them open dramatically and rushed to her side, shouting to my aunt to stop being such a bitch.

That did it, of course, not least because I was supposed to be confined to my room until Uncle Wilfred came home. When he did, he made far less of the curtain incident than his wife had done, though my calling her a bitch got me six hard whacks on my bottom with a slipper, plus my having to make a formal apology to my aunt, which was received with even less grace than I showed when offering it.

Despite the whacks, it really wasn't Uncle Wilfred I had it in for next day when I dug the sizable hole on the narrow path which led down steeply between the overgrown rhododendrons at the bottom of their garden. This was where Aunt Gloria walked her bad-tempered, overfed Pekingese after breakfast on most mornings. I covered my excavation with a lattice of twigs disguised by grass cuttings. My expectation was that Aunt Gloria would step into the hole, break her neck, and, being unable to summon help, expire from loss of blood, or pneumonia, or starvation before her absence was noticed and her decomposing body discovered.

It was an outrageously improbable scenario, of course, but it was a brave knight's stalwart intention that counted, after all.

Unfortunately, Aunt Gloria didn't take her walk on the succeeding two days because it rained. Early on the third morning, the boy from next-door fell into the hole when we were playing hide-and-seek in the garden. He hurt his ankle and face and had to be ferried by Ogden, the decrepit gardener, in a wheelbarrow back up to the house, dazed and with a blackening eye and a bleeding lip. I took consolation from the fact that my plan had worked in principle, albeit against the wrong target.

"Danged squirrels digging up everything again, Mrs. Betcher," Ogden complained to Aunt Gloria after the other boy's mother had taken him away. I dearly wanted to inform the old fool that squirrels didn't make holes that big, but naturally held my tongue.

The school-holiday visit to our only Betcher family relatives (my aunt and uncle had no children) ended the following day. I made no further attempt to exterminate Aunt Gloria on that occasion. Indeed, until late last summer, I never felt the same totally irresistible urge to get rid of her again. But that childhood effort to do so, I suppose, endured in my mind still as a sort of dark fairy tale—and endure it did.

My father had perished in a car accident. Driving while drunk, he had hit a tree. I was three at the time. His passing was deeply

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mourned by my mother, who never remarried. His memory was respected by Uncle Wilfred, who, for reasons that will become clear, for a time unfairly blamed himself for not having done enough to help and inspire his half-brother to make more of life, especially since in terms of inheritance, their father had treated Arnold as a less deserving, lower-grade offspring. More surprisingly, Aunt Gloria seemed desolated by my father's demise, though according to contemporaries, she had shown him a good deal less affection in life than she did after he'd departed from it. Certainly she exhibited reducing concern for his grieving widow. An inveterate snob, my aunt was given to insisting, intentionally once in my hearing when I was eighteen, that my father had made "a quite unsuitable marriage to a little copy-typist who had driven him to drink." I came to the conclusion then that my "well-born," childless Aunt Gloria resented my mother, first, for having "married above her station," and, secondly, for having been blessed with child—the last cause for bitterness embracing me as well. She was also incredibly mean with money.

Uncle Wilfred had been twenty-six when my father was born. Father was the only child of my grandfather's late second marriage, as Wilfred had been of the first. Since Grandfather himself expired five years later, the older son increasingly grew to be a father figure to his only sibling. It was Wilfred who was to inherit the family business from my grandfather, whose will had made adequate and specific material provision for my Grandma Emma, his second wife, and "any progeny from our union," under the terms of the couple's marriage settlement. A later codicil to the will also looked to Wilfred "to care for Arnold's general well-being until he is eighteen," at which time he was to come into the income from a £10,000 trust fund my grandfather had set up for him, it seems as an afterthought.

It was pretty decent of Uncle Wilfred to have observed Grandfather's wishes about my father's situation until he came to his majority, especially as there had been nothing obligatory in the loose way those wishes had been expressed. Meantime, my Grandma Emma seems to have spent most of her settlement on herself rather than on her son. For instance, but for Wilfred's generosity, Father would not have been sent to one of England's most expensive private boarding schools, though it seems he lacked the intelligence, and probably the ambition, to benefit from the standard of tuition offered. Uncle also gave my father an allowance until, in 1953, he came into the income from the trust fund which would have produced around £600 a year—then just enough for a young bachelor to live on, but not lavishly.

In a sense, it was probably a pity that my father had any private income at all because, again according to contemporaries, being at

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heart just an engaging, good-looking playboy, he did no more than dabble with various jobs in the surety that when he failed in them he always had the trust income to fall back upon. One of his early jobs had been as a trainee salesman with the family firm. This had been created for him by my uncle, and it seems my father had failed at it miserably. At least he'd had the grace to resign his position rather than to further embarrass my uncle.

In 1961, when my parents married, far from being a lowly "copy-typist" (though that was one notch higher than "shopgirl" in my aunt's social order), my mother had been private secretary to an important company director. This was the kind of responsible post she continued to fill, up to, and for thirty years after, my father's death. She told me often what a charming, engaging, and entertaining man he was, that really his true vocation should have been in the creative arts—in music, acting, writing, or design (although I believe this was wishful thinking on her part)—and that he had only taken to drinking "a little too much" through frustrations stemming from his lack of career progress. She had adored him in his lifetime—and with added fervour after it when the causes of his failures would have been easier for her to disguise.

There was no doubt that it was my mother's income that enabled the couple to live as well as they did at their pretty Victorian cottage in a country town twenty or so miles northwest of Uncle Wilfred's mansion. After she became pregnant with me, though, it seems Father determined to take his responsibilities as a husband and future parent more seriously. As Mother admitted to me years later, he had gone to Uncle Wilfred desperately begging to be given another chance with the firm, and promising faithfully to justify the opportunity. Uncle had accepted his word, but because his half-brother's previous attempts to become a salesman had proved so abysmal, this time he was put into the personnel department. It was unfortunate that three years later he proved to be a failure there as well.

The company manufactured metal components for the automotive industry. Uncle Wilfred was a graduate engineer and a business high-flyer. Under his direction, the organisation had grown hugely, so much so that it became an attractive takeover target, and in 1962 was merged with the market leader. Brilliant Wilfred was made chief executive of the much enlarged company and had risen to be chairman before his death from heart failure—which happened without warning in 1977—relatively early for someone of his age. Grandma Emma was called to her reward, as my mother put it, in the same year at the French Riviera apartment where she had lived for many years, having severed relations with the family. I hope her heavenly reward was better than the one she left her relatives on earth. This was precisely nothing after

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her properties were sold and her debts paid.

This left only me, my mother, and Aunt Gloria—if you exclude her Pekingese, not the same one, but it was just as bad-tempered as the previous two.

Surprisingly, Uncle Wilfred had died legally intestate—meaning that he left no will. Probably this was because he had been too busy, or had not seen the need for a will at sixty-eight—something which could also have been stoked by a surreptitious but overweening belief in his own indestructibility, a common syndrome in ageing ex-whiz kids. Whatever the reason or reasons for his overlooking my continued existence, he left me without benefit or prospect of benefit from his life's work.

In other words, Aunt Gloria got the lot.

I had never been involved with my uncle's company—nor ever needed to be. After my father's death, and definitely after the curtain-dyeing episode, my mother and I had seen less and less of the older Betcher couple. As time went on, my mother had grown in self-confidence and independence. In a sense, this played into the hands of Aunt Gloria, who was no doubt glad when we withdrew voluntarily from the scene. I suspect Uncle Wilfred had been too busy to notice, or that he left arrangements for family socialising to his wife, so that when there wasn't any he assumed that this was how we wanted it. While it is possible that things might have been different if the original firm had survived, after it was subsumed, as it were, into a much larger public company, any sentimental, tribal attachments had withered on the bough.

The gift of a modest block of shares in the now mammoth corporation would not have seriously upset my mother's principles, certainly if they had been left to me. We still had the income from the trust fund. This had grown over the years, but not nearly so much as the fund itself could have done if Grandfather had not specified that the capital could only be invested in government funds with a safe but unexciting yield. No matter: I had done well in the local state schools, entered architectural college at eighteen, and graduated, with no debts, five years later. It was not until then, of course, that I was able even to think about trying to repay my mother for looking after my every need since my father's death, chiefly out of her own salary. In fact, she wouldn't take a penny of my earnings, but at least I never had to accept any more of hers.

Three years ago I was made a full partner in a successful architectural practice in Birmingham after winning an international architectural competition for the design of a new town centre. As a result of that, I was headhunted to run the in-house design department of an international construction company with headquarters in London, with the promise of a seat on the board.

My mother was over the moon at all this—and so was Jenny

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Lagden, the woman who had just agreed to marry me. Blond, pretty, vivacious Jenny, eight years younger than me, was a talented actress who was close to making it onto London's West End stage, while playing lead roles with good touring companies and showy supporting parts in TV dramas. In short, things were looking good for me—which is why, perhaps, I was greedy to make them even better.

It was a Sunday morning in mid September when I was driving Jenny from London to my mother's. We were to spend the night with her. Mother had recently retired, but still lived in the house where she had brought me up. On a whim, more or less, I decided to make a diversion and drop in on Aunt Gloria. I didn't telephone ahead because I wasn't going to give my aunt the chance to make an excuse not to see us. She and I hadn't met for over a decade, and I thought it was time to heal the rift. There were other reasons, too, one of them not quite so virtuous nor even so charitable as the others. Of course I wanted to show off Jenny, and perhaps to demonstrate to her that there was a stately home in the family. Then, to be absolutely honest, I also wanted to waken my immensely wealthy aunt to the fact that she had a successful nephew shortly to be wed, who deserved a wholesome wedding present or at least a place in her will.

Nor, all things considered, am I ashamed of that last aspiration—even if my mother would have been. Aunt Gloria was now in her eighties, and I felt it would be a pity if I allowed myself to be passed over from receiving a family legacy simply because I hadn't troubled to remind her, in person, of my continued existence. We exchanged Christmas cards every year, but that was the current extent of our relationship.

Turning into the drive, my first impression was how much smaller the house was than I remembered. Even so, it was still a substantial, well-maintained Victorian pile with a large garden in a very desirable commuter area. At today's prices, I figured it had to be worth close on two million pounds.

The person who answered the door was not my aunt. It was a younger, tallish woman, aged around sixty, who greeted us with a polite, enquiring smile. Slim, with dark, short, well-shaped hair, she was dressed conservatively in a white blouse under an oatmeal-coloured cardigan, and a flared tweed skirt. There was a short string of small matching pearls around her neck. What I noticed most about her, though, were the intelligent blue eyes—and the steely assessment, tinged perhaps with apprehension, that they were making of the two people standing before her.

When we introduced ourselves, the woman stiffened for a moment before offering her hand. "I thought I recognised a family likeness, Mr. Betcher. Well now, I thought we might never meet," she said in a

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softly modulated, cultured voice and accent. "Do come in. Your aunt is on the terrace. I'm sure she'll be delighted to see you. We were taking coffee outside in the sunshine." She led us from the hall into the drawing room—through the double doors I recalled so well—and from there to the stone-flagged, south-facing terrace.

Unlike the house, Aunt Gloria had not worn well. She had shrunk, as most older people do, of course, but had also lost a good deal of weight. Her face was unduly wizened, and there was a walking stick propped against her chair. But she recognised me instantly, and her tone was firm as she proffered, less affably than the occasion merited: "So, as I expected, Digby, you hadn't intended to abandon me permanently. Even so, you've left it quite late"—the last sentence came as she was studying Jenny.

The "tinge" of guilt I had felt about my underlying purpose in making the visit ratcheted up to "strong sense" after what I took to be the implication of my aunt's words. Inwardly I cursed the wretched woman as a cynic—which, on reflection, I suppose made me a hypocrite.

She had shaken hands with me from her brightly cushioned raffia chair, but there had been no kissing. After repeating the performance with Jenny, she motioned us to sit. The other woman, now identified as a Mrs. Claire Amhurst, had left to find extra cups and to replenish the contents of the silver coffee pot. In her absence, my aunt explained that Mrs. Amhurst was a widow who had accepted to be her companion more than a year earlier. "The arrangement works very well," she enlarged woodenly. "As you would expect, of course, between ladies with similar educated tastes, values, and . . . and religious beliefs." There was special emphasis on the last two words. I had never been aware that my aunt was at all religious, and as for her educated tastes, she was one of the most uninformed women I had ever known. "Are you an architect, too, Miss, er . . . Miss Lagden?" she continued. We had already explained that we intended to marry.

"Please, call me Jenny," my fiancée responded brightly. "No, I'm not an architect. Not clever enough for that. I'm an actress."

There was a distinct drawing in of breath as my aunt digested what appeared for her to be undisguisedly unwholesome tidings. "Indeed. We seldom go to the theatre," was her limited verbal response. I took it that "we" meant herself and her companion, not "we" in the way Queen Victoria always turned herself into a crowd, but I wouldn't have put it past Aunt Gloria to have assumed regal appendages in her dotage.

"Jenny's a very fine actress," I put in defensively, adding unnecessarily, "She's often on the TV."

Before Aunt Gloria had the opportunity to tell us that "we" seldom watched television, her companion had reappeared.

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It was Mrs. Amhurst who enquired whether we could stay for lunch. We refused politely, explaining that we were, genuinely as it happened, engaged to lunch with my mother. But I was intrigued to note that the invitation had come unprompted from Mrs. Amhurst, and without instigation or clearance from her employer—unless the two had been operating some especially subtle method of secret communication, and I doubted that. It did appear, though, in this and other contexts, that whilst Mrs. Amhurst was overly solicitous for my aunt's every pleasure and whim, it was the companion who made the decisions, both small and large—such as whether my aunt should keep her hat on against the sun, or as in the matter of the luncheon invitation. It seemed that my aunt was very much under the other's control.

Aunt Gloria had shown no dismay about our need to depart quite soon, and while she took the opportunity at the mention of my mother to enquire after her health, her concern did not extend beyond that cursory politeness. Her interest in my life and Jenny's, and in our future together, was similarly scant—except Mrs. Amhurst tried to make the going here, too, most particularly where Jenny was concerned. Mrs. Amhurst had been distantly related to a prominent but now deceased actor with whom Jenny had appeared, in minor roles, during a short season with the Royal Shakespeare Company. Their exchanges on this subject proved thoroughly engaging, until my aunt rudely interrupted them with a dissertation about her wretched dog's arthritis. The episode clearly irritated Jenny, whose normal disposition is warm and tolerant.

Just ahead of our departure, Mrs. Amhurst had absented herself again, unprompted, but I assumed out of good manners, on the pretext of removing the tray of coffee things. In her warmest yet comment on any thing or any body, my aunt then broke into a voluble commendation of her companion.

"Her presence here has given me a new savour for life," she pronounced earnestly. "With her beside me I'm good for many years yet, to be cared for with unlimited affection." She sniffed, long and pointedly, looking from me to Jenny, then back again. "Claire Amhurst's dedication to me has to be experienced to be appreciated," she continued. "Nothing is too much trouble for her if it brings me comfort. Such sacrifice is quite exceptional in today's selfish world. . . . She's a treasure I rate above riches."

"I'm so glad for you, Aunt, very glad," I offered, wondering if the last comment was a way of self-excusing the fact that she was overpaying her companion: That would have been typical of her established skinflint ways.

"Good," she replied. "And I'm glad you young people are making such a success of your lives, I hope spiritually as well as materi-

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ally. Mrs. Amhurst hadn't enjoyed many material benefits before she came to me. She had to nurse a very sick husband for many years before he died. Such dedication. He'd been a poor country parson before that." She paused, shaking her head while she allowed us to ponder on the likely privations of life in the vicarage. "So that she will never need to want again, I've made her, in effect, my heir. After I'm gone she'll not be too old to enjoy life fully for the first time." There was another pause during which, despite the bombshell, I tried to appear objectively unaffected. "Although the . . . the family has chosen to neglect me all these years," she went on, "I've still left you a modest legacy in my will, Digby. You must accept, even so, that our fortune is nothing, relatively speaking, to what it was in your uncle's day. Taxes and living costs have soared so mercilessly." Aunt Gloria had lost none of her directness—nor her exasperating way of rewriting history. "Of course," she ended, "I took into account that you still enjoy the benefit of your grandfather's trust fund, which he generously set aside for your father and his progeny, at the unselfish instigation of my dear husband and myself." She hadn't been able to resist this last invented and unprovable assertion.

The beatified Mrs. Amhurst materialised again at that point, wearing a disarmingly humble expression, possibly a bit of playacting, I thought, if she'd been behind the terrace door listening to the conversation. We left a minute or so later.

I was seized with fury about the glib way in which Aunt Gloria had chosen to as good as disown me, and my mother, too. If that cold and gullible woman had not systematically spurned our company, she could have enjoyed all the family love and goodwill she could ever have wanted. I could not countenance that my aunt had needed to look outside the family for good example when my mother had been exhibiting just that since the time she had married my father. More personally, I was the next natural heir to my grandfather's fortune. Clearly, I could have accepted things if my aunt and uncle had produced any children, but they hadn't. For the bulk of what was still my grandfather's original estate now to be left to a virtual stranger, and conceivably a plausible trickster, passed my understanding. As for Mrs. Amhurst, it was unlikely that anyone in her right mind would lavish affection on my aunt except for an underlying profitable motive—and justifiably so.

In the next few months my anger at the injustice of the situation developed into a fixation that soured my disposition, the quality of my work, and prevented me from sleeping for nights on end. It came to the point that, for the second time in my life, I could think of nothing that gave me satisfaction except the plotting of a deadly vengeance against my unfeeling aunt, born of an ire I easily sublimated as revenge for the offence she had caused by belit-

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tling my Guinevere.

It was nearly December before I woke to the acceptance that I had worked myself into a mindless obsession, and, more practically, a pointless one involving a worse than merely juvenile, unhinged, and outrageous remedy. Despite the several methods I had devised in the dead of wide-awake nights to "do in" Aunt Gloria—far more refined and foolproof, I should add, than the "squirrel hole" of my untutored youth—the damage to me was done, and, no matter how sweet the revenge, murdering her would not undo it. The true cause of my initial fixation was not highfaluting injustice, but lowest-level filthy lucre, and once I had come to that demeaning truth, the obsession gradually dispersed. It's a free world, and my aunt was entitled to leave her money to whomsoever she wished—damn her hide.

At least I had a "modest legacy" to anticipate—and I hoped it would be big enough to fund the luxury cruise to historic Greece that my mother had always longed to take, but to which she had never allowed me to treat her. It would be a nice irony if Aunt Gloria could be made to pay for it, even posthumously.

It was during the following February that my mother called me at the office to say that my aunt had died as the result of an accident. She had tripped over her ailing Pekingese, while moving along uneven ground through the rhododendrons. She had broken a hip and, it transpired, her heart had not been able to withstand the rigours of the operation that followed. Poor Aunt Gloria. I was relieved, well, mildly, when it later transpired that the event had taken place a good twenty yards from my early excavation.

My mother went on to explain that it had been Mrs. Amhurst who had telephoned the sad news, and who had also wanted to know if we wished to make the funeral arrangements, or whether we would prefer her or my aunt's lawyers to do so. She had wanted to call me about this, but had not been able to find my address or telephone number in my aunt's address book. Aunt Gloria's Christmas cards had always been addressed to my mother and myself at my mother's house, no doubt to save money on cards and postage.

I said I'd deal with Mrs. Amhurst, then rang the lady. We agreed that she and my mother should make the funeral arrangements together, referring all expenses to the lawyers, whom I promised to call to regularise the arrangements, since funeral costs are tax deductable. Mrs. Amhurst said she knew that. It was one of the reasons she'd hesitated to do anything without my sanction. I realised then that, of course, as a vicar's wife and widow she would probably be all too familiar with the legal consequences of a death in the family.

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I rang Henry Houghton first thing next morning. I had known him since we were boys: He is three years older than me. His father, Percival, now retired, had been my uncle's family lawyer. Henry is now the senior partner in the practice in Stratford. Amongst other things, he administers the trust fund of which I have been the beneficiary since my father's death, so that, perforce, we have been in touch quite frequently over the years.

After expressing his condolences on the phone, Henry sounded a touch hesitant. Assuming this might well be because he had drawn up my aunt's will and was embarrassed to be speaking to her disinherited heir, I broached the subject myself.

"About Aunt Gloria's will, Henry," I said lightly. "I know she's only left me the small change."

"Ah, you know the contents of the will, do you?" He responded in a tone that suggested more of concern than relief, something I found rather touching.

I chuckled. "Certainly I do. She thoroughly relished telling me about them not long ago. I assume Mrs. Amhurst knew them, too? That she's to inherit nearly everything?"

There was a pause from the other end of the line. "Actually, she didn't know, Digby."

"You mean until you told her?"

"Well, it's more complicated than that." He cleared his throat. "I called at the house on my way home last evening. That was after you'd spoken to Mrs. Amhurst on the telephone. I needed to pick up the original copy of the will which I'd sent to your aunt to sign nearly six months ago."

"You didn't have it in safekeeping at your office?"

"No . . . no, we didn't. We had a copy, of course, but not the signed one which I'll need to submit eventually to the probate office." He paused again. Henry never did go in for fast repartee. "The fact is, she never sent it back to me after she'd signed it."

"Probably because you didn't enclose a stamped, addressed, legal-sized envelope," I joked, knowing my aunt's thriftiness.

"It's possible you may be right about that, Digby," Henry responded guardedly. "We normally do send one, but it may have been left out this time. Anyway, she'd put the will in the locked strongbox she kept in her desk. But our standard instructions to clients about how it had to be signed and witnessed, and by whom, and so on, were certainly in the covering letter we sent with it. I can assure you of that."

"You sound defensive, Henry," I said. "Has something gone wrong? Was there a special reason why Mrs. Amhurst didn't know she was the chief beneficiary?"

"Yes. But not the one you think. She mentioned to me, almost in an aside when I arrived, that she knew she couldn't be a benefi-

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ciary because your aunt had asked her to be one of the witnesses, the witnessing signatories, when she signed it."

I swallowed slowly before commenting as soberly as I could manage: "You mean she knew that no one who witnesses a will may be a beneficiary from it? That otherwise his or her signature invalidates the thing?"

"Renders it null and void, yes. She knew that, even if your aunt didn't," Henry responded even more soberly.

"My aunt was a very ignorant woman. And Mrs. Amhurst never mentioned to her that she couldn't be a beneficiary if she was a signatory?"

"Apparently not. Why should she? She's a well-mannered person. I took it she felt that the contents of the will were none of her business."

"And did you tell her—?"

"That your aunt intended her to be a beneficiary? Certainly not," Henry interrupted, uncharacteristically. "I needed to look into the legal consequences of the new circumstances. I was about to call you when you rang."

"So what's the next step with the will, Henry?"

"There isn't one. As I first assumed, it's null and void."

"What if Mrs. Amhurst wants to fight it?"

"No lawyer worth his salt would advise her even to try. There are far too many legal precedents to make it worth even risking the costs involved, especially since there are no other beneficiaries to complain except you. In any case, Mrs. Amhurst has made it clear to me she expected nothing. No, to all intents and purposes your aunt died intestate, like her husband, though for a different reason." Henry paused before adding, "As her only close relative, you'll inherit everything, of course."

"Everything," I intoned after him.

"That's what the law of intestacy will confirm, Digby. There'll be inheritance tax to pay, of course, but what's left will be . . . will be quite substantial."

In the end, the value of what was left was substantial enough for me to provide the admirable Mrs. Amhurst with a handsome source of solid extra income, though I had to fight to make her accept it—my mother was the same. They now share Mother's house—two merry widows, as they describe themselves, with common tastes. At the moment they're on their second cruise—an extended tour around South America. It seems that my Aunt Gloria attracted folk with opposite values to her own, and who lived in hopes that by example they might convert her to the right way.

My mother and Mrs. Amhurst never succeeded in this, but I'm glad I spared her life to let them try. ●

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WAITING

by Derek Nikitas

Since we first published Derek Nikitas last year, the Brockport, N.Y., author has sold nongenre stories to the literary magazines *Traffic East* and *Chelsea*, and a mystery to *Judas E-Zine*. Mr. Nikitas is the recipient of an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of North Carolina. Joyce Carol Oates has called his stories "very subtly written, and quite touching and powerful." †

Anne had been waiting, preserving herself for over twenty-six years. Not for religious practice—though growing up she'd gone to church most holidays—and not unwillingly. She wasn't desperate, either. Maybe rather gangly, kind of moonfaced and pale, and a couple matchsticks taller than most girls, but not ugly. Not by anyone's standard.

Was it fear, maybe? Some nights thoughts of love would strobe through her mind, but whether those flashes brought thrill or dread she couldn't tell. When she imagined her deflowering and what came afterward, it all looked just black, like the inner wall of a cocoon, as if she'd get reborn from it all malformed, thrashing around, unfit for survival.

But then Anne met and fell in love with Daniel Green, a theology graduate student at SUNY Hammersport. Met him when he walked into World Wide Travel, where she worked as an agent. Said he wanted to book a flight to Israel for thesis research. Tall enough to duck under the blow-up plastic airplanes that dangled by twine from the ceiling. A bit chubby, balding at his crown, dressed in a brown corduroy suit coat and pants. His first words to her were, " 'Scuse me, ma'am. I hate so much to bother you." For real, and spoken in all seriousness with a Southern twang she later learned was Georgian. He'd asked her to join him at a college art opening, and after that first date several weeks passed before Anne truly understood that they were a couple. Before he even tried to kiss her.

Now, six months later, Anne and Daniel were alone in her bedroom, where frigid air leaked through the window cracks and plastic insulation screens. The radiator clicked out its thin warmth, and Daniel knelt beside the bed like a child praying before sleep. He looked away from Anne whenever he spoke. He was shirtless,

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wearing his slacks and shoes, belt unbuckled.

On the bed, Anne lay above the comforter—naked for the first time in someone else's presence. She wore only her white ankle socks. Goosebumps sprouted on her arms and legs, and she clenched her teeth to stop their chattering.

After a while Daniel removed his glasses, rested his head against her hipbone, and squinted at his own fingers sweeping along her belly. His fingers tapped her ribs as if he were playing piano keys, playing a song that she'd heard often in her dreams.

Anne tried not to look at her own body. Instead she pushed her fingers through Daniel's thinning hair. A tea candle on her desk cast faint shuddering light across her bedroom, outlining the open closet door, the twin bed, the flat map of Earth on the wall beside her. The planet's continents shrank and bulged as they dragged away from the Equator. Anne had traveled across that distorted globe—to Mexico and Sweden, the Bahamas. Back in college she'd studied in France and for a while taken on the style of the young Parisian women she admired—pageboy haircut, dark skirts, and knee-high boots.

"Are you sure you want to?" Daniel asked.

"Yes—of course," she said. "I love you." She chose Daniel for better reasons than mere attraction. She chose him because she knew he'd guide her carefully and patiently into what awaited her after tonight.

"Do you hear something?" Daniel asked her.

"What?" She covered herself with her arms.

"I thought I heard something." He pushed himself up, groaning. His pale gut glowed yellowish in the candlelight. Anne looked away, into the darkness of her bedroom doorway. It was empty at first, but as she watched, the blackness in the entrance took on a human shape.

Someone else was standing there.

"Who are you?" Daniel said toward the door.

"Richard?" said Anne. Her voice came out raspy—the remnants of a recent flu. Daniel's hands were no longer touching her. In an instant she was unanchored and drifting. She wanted to grab something to cover herself, but her arms wouldn't budge.

"Gloria?" It was Richard. Her roommate Gloria's boyfriend. Ex-boyfriend. He spoke from where he stood at the doorway to Anne's bedroom. The wrong bedroom. He spoke Gloria's name as if it belonged to him.

Daniel started to rise, but then he dropped just as swiftly back to the throw rug on the floor. The gust of his fall doused the tea candle and darkened the room. Through that fresh dark came an afterimage of Richard's arm swiping, striking at Daniel. Then the thump of something hard against flesh.

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Anne slid herself against the world map and thrust her knees against her chest, covered herself with a pillow. She couldn't see through the darkness to where Daniel had dropped to the floor.

"Gloria?" It was Richard's voice again.

"Richard," Anne said.

"Anne? Is that Anne?" Richard said.

"What are you doing? Daniel? Did you hit Daniel?" Her shrill panicked voice rattled even her own heart. She was plummeting from the steady confidence she'd clutched just seconds before.

"Who?" Richard said. "What's—where's Gloria?"

"She's not here!" Anne said. "This is my room!"

A sudden light shined, the overhead lamp, and it burned her eyes. She squinted at the vision that came blurred and bright like tropical noon. Daniel lay on his back with one arm crossed over his face. His skin looked all wrong to her, rubbery.

Richard was brush-cut and unshaven, darkness stamped in both his eye sockets. He clutched a chef's blade that he must have stolen from Anne and Gloria's kitchen. In the other hand he held a rock that was wet from melting snow and no bigger than a softball. It could have come from anywhere out there in that winter night, that rock he'd used to strike Daniel.

"I hit him. I thought you were Gloria," Richard said in a voice unhinged. He struck the rock against his own forehead—a thick, meaty thump. Then he hissed at the pain.

"This is my room! What are you doing?" Anne said.

"Dammit! I thought she was in here with somebody—hiding in here—messing around. I took this rock first, and then the knife—I couldn't stand it—hearing her in here with somebody else. I saw you people—naked—I didn't think—"

Anne cringed at his voice, recoiled as if the air swarmed with razors all bearing down on her. She couldn't hold her body tight enough in her own grasp. She wanted Richard to rush away, backwards, reversing everything, everything mistaken restored. All the way back to before they'd met him.

Maybe even to the time she and Gloria had waited under the sunburned Mexican sky for the old hombre who every afternoon led two horses toward their hotel and offered half-hour excursions.

High tide had thrust the Pacific waters against the promenade and drowned the steps leading down to the beach. White and Mexican vacationers bobbed like driftwood in waves that were warm as blood. At their table Anne and Gloria drank margaritas from plastic cups, and they swatted the fuzz-brown bees that had tracked the liquor scent. The Mexican heat siphoned sweat from their bodies. Even the hotel pools boiled. The booze worked more quickly in these sultry highs, hazing through the brain like a gas.

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Like Anne, Gloria worked at the World Wide Travel Agency in downtown Hammersport. She was born Brazilian, raised in Brooklyn. At her desk back home she could fling reservations and confirmations across the known world—simultaneous calls in English, Spanish, Portuguese—as her fingers swiped over the desk globe as if she knew how to find by mountainous contours those places she speed-dialed. Gloria wore shirts that told secrets about her body—the silver waist chain attached to her belly-button ring, the vaccination scar burned onto her shoulder.

Under the dining hut, the other tourists gorged themselves on Mexican wraps and hamburgers, guzzled Sol *cervezas,* an *almuerzo* paced with the mariachi brass and strings. From within that shade came Jorge wearing his turquoise resort-staff T-shirt. He strangled the neck of a tequila bottle and pinched a shot glass.

"Aperitivo?" he asked them through his postcard grin. Anne had been swooning over his charm ever since she'd arrived, even though she suspected his tone was dictated by staff rules.

Jorge sloshed the tequila, even as Gloria slurped the last of her margarita and nodded consent. He poured a shotful and tipped the liquor through Gloria's lips in one lewd gulp. Another staffer sprang from nowhere to drop a sombrero over Gloria's head and to puff a shrill kazoo as Gloria swallowed, cringing.

"Y tu, señorita?" Jorge asked Anne.

"No, no, thank you." Anne slouched, eyeing her hands in her lap. She waited for the sombrero and kazoo and scrutiny to pass away.

"Abstinencia is a tender virtue, *si, Santa Anna?"* His accent swam like ice water through Anne's heat and liquor daze. Maybe that was why she agreed to meet with him later that night after-hours at the hotel club, where the open bars drenched tourists in a torch-fire fiesta just beneath a mountainside jungle that was alive with iguanas and fist-sized tarantulas.

But instead of meeting him that night she stayed inside her hotel room. Instead she lay on her bed and fingered the beads that a *peluquera* had braided into her hair; she scratched the thigh and calf bites she'd earned on horseback in the mountains. She'd been saddled, and she couldn't swipe the mosquitoes away or else she'd have collapsed into the dirt. They'd pierced and gorged with her blood, and she'd been forced to watch.

She knew Jorge was sitting out there at the bar with his amigos, puffing American cigarettes, waiting for her, fuming like the cherry tip of his smoke. She couldn't chart the exact moment she'd crumpled—just small hesitations, minutes burned away until she realized she'd stalled too long to salvage an excuse.

Eventually, Jorge came searching, as she knew he would. She expected he'd come bearing down and demanding reasons. She'd worked herself into anticipating such a threat. But he gave only a

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quiet knock, and then said, *"Santa Anna? Señorita?* Do you forget me? *Estás aqui?"*

She gazed unblinking nowhere. She'd almost wanted his anger; it would have offered the excuse that she'd been waiting for. But no movement, nothing but the translucent, dime-tiny crabs shuffling laterally beneath the bed.

She wanted to go back, but they were bound together in this cramped bedroom—Richard and Anne, and Daniel unconscious on the floor. Richard dropped the rock onto the carpet. He bunched the front of his cobalt work shirt in both hands, even while the knife still jutted from his clenched fist. He moaned and whirled and swung his clawed fingers into her open closet, tearing down outfits. The metal hangers shimmered.

"Richard," Anne said. "We have to call an ambulance!"

"No! We can't call anybody! We can't!"

"Please! He'll be all right! He's just knocked out for a second. He'll be okay. Just please call!"

"Don't yell! No yelling! We have to wait!"

"For what?" she asked.

"Gloria," he said.

"Richard, please—"

"She thinks she can just call me up on the phone and break up with me—on my answering machine. There's no way, you understand? I won't let that happen."

"Don't hurt anyone else. Please. You've already—"

Richard's lips spasmed. He tightened his jaw beneath the bristles on his face and scowled at Daniel. Then he hunkered down on his knees, crawled toward him. He raised the chef's blade and pricked the tip against Daniel's sternum. The knife shivered there against Daniel's skin.

"Richard, what—" Anne said.

"You got to be quiet," Richard said. He was poised like some amateur magician that Anne couldn't move to stop and couldn't speak to dissuade. He groaned and lurched his shoulders as if a wave of nausea had splashed him. The blade sank down to the black hilt now pressed into Daniel's stomach.

"There! There you are, dammit! You're done!" Richard howled, jabbing one sharp finger toward Daniel's head. He crawled back to the doorway, groaning through his teeth.

"You killed him!" Anne screamed.

The knife hilt hovered in place. It ticked gently like a stuck metronome. It beat as a heart beats. Blood rivulets rushed all at once, snaking across Daniel's ribs onto the carpet. His weak hand clawed at the rug as if clutching for something. For Anne.

"No yelling! You have to wait," Richard said. He inched toward

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Daniel again, crouched like an ape. Anne lunged whatever she held in her hands—a useless mass that puffed against Richard's head and fell. Her pillow. Without it, she felt her body exposed to Richard and the cold air. She tried to pull the comforter over herself but everything was tucked so carefully, and her seizure-struck hands couldn't grasp a thing.

"I'm going to lock you in the bathroom," he said.

He grasped her wrist and yanked, and her body tumbled as if it was already a corpse. He dragged her off the bed. In one step, Daniel's warm blood seeped against her left sock heel, and only the force of Richard's pull kept her from collapsing as they shoved through the living room where the remnants of her and Daniel's dinner sat on the coffee table—wine and shrimp-stuffed chicken, French-cut green beans. They'd been too anxious to eat much of it.

Across the kitchen and into the bathroom—a windowless closet where a bathtub, sink, toilet, and radiator were wedged together. It was an eyesore of peeling paint, of jutting porcelain and cabinet doors scuffing into each other. But the dusty radiator heat blasted her chill skin back to life. The door clicked shut behind her and she twisted the doorknob lock. Kitchen light seeped under the door. Out there Richard's boots crunched the linoleum.

A tiny socket-bulb cast its light onto her skin. For a moment she forgot her nudity—this body that she'd prepared for Daniel, shaved and oiled and perfumed like a ritual. In the full-length mirror on the door she saw a woman hunched and diminished. A stranger.

She wanted the woman in the mirror to cover herself. But there were no towels for covering; all of them dirty and set for washing in the overflowing laundry basket in Gloria's bedroom.

The radiator heat bled into Anne's legs and her back. As each stretch of her body warmed, it melted away until she had no sensations left. She thought she could almost drift off like a dream of herself, but the instant Richard threw open the bathroom door she would slam back into all her pain and cold. She would feel whatever he wanted to inflict.

A month ago Anne had sat with the cordless in her hand, waiting for eight o'clock when she'd call Daniel on his cell phone. She was sometimes ashamed of her constant longing for his voice, but love was not easily stalled or reversed; it only plowed headlong forward.

Richard was there in the bedroom with Gloria, like always. Nights when he slept over, Gloria's bedroom sounds drifted through the walls to where Anne lay on the couch in her pajamas, sipping chamomile tea and trying to read through European travel guides. Gloria lost her innocence at age thirteen. "And why not?" she asked Anne, with her voice already raspy from smoking since at least that same age.

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Anne lost track of whole pages listening to those noises, straining to ignore them. But right now, Anne guessed, the two of them were probably spooning on the bed watching TV, Richard clutching a White Russian highball. His fingers always stained with grease, and his blue shirt stitched with *Richey* on the breast pocket because he worked down at the Northside Auto Garage. The woozy stench of motor oil on his body. One of Rich's eyes, the left one, was sliced up from a knife fight a few years ago. The pupil of that eye looked as if it had exploded through the iris like a dark star gone supernova.

They were not calm in there for long. The fight started with Gloria's ragged whispers about how Richard had worked an hour late at the garage. But he couldn't reason with Gloria, couldn't calm her. Then came the thud against the wall and Gloria bellowing, "I'm calling the cops on you!" She came screeching from her bedroom. And there was Richard close behind, grabbing at her with his clawed hands. Their two bodies flung together across the apartment and rumbled everything so that it seemed the house might implode. Gloria swiped up the kitchen phone, dialed *nine* and *one* but not the last *one* before Richard wrenched it away chanting, "sweetie, sweetie," while she slapped at him. Her neck was already sprouting red welts in the shape of Richard's fingers.

Nine and *one* was enough. The dispatcher called back and when no one answered the police came. Their red flashing lights whipped through the windows as they swerved up the driveway. The lights draped across the living-room walls like a sudden coat of paint. Anne sat on the couch, waiting. She knew she had only to wait, because she lived with the sense that human anger surged and always passed like bad weather.

"Did he do that to you?" the police asked Gloria, sitting with her at the kitchen table. She covered her neck with her own hands. By then, Richard was outside sucking cigarettes and pleading with another officer.

"It was an accident," Gloria said. Her lipstick had dwindled into the cracks of her lips, and tears cut streams through her makeup. She had dressed for clubbing in candy-striped nylons and hoop earrings and hairspray, but now she was a party whose guests never showed. The officer watched stone-faced as Gloria recited the same crap excuses he'd probably learned verbatim from other women.

"Would you like to have him arrested, ma'am?"

"No. No," Gloria said. "I shouldn't have called you. I didn't, even—just the first two numbers, but I guess that was enough because you called back. I was afraid to answer. I'm sorry you had to come all the way—"

"Where were you when this happened?" The cop glared at Anne where she stood in the kitchen archway. He was asking her. Now Anne was implicated, almost accused.

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"I didn't know what to do," Anne said, and the cop lowered his head, nodding slightly, inking her words forever onto a notepad.

The kitchen phone rang. Richard answered gruffly, as if something other than silence had been interrupted. "No, she's not here," he said. "I'm waiting for her. This is Richard—who's this? . . . Richard, her boyfriend. . . . She's not here, either. Tell me who you are. . . . Neither of them. No one else is here right now."

He hung up the phone. Anne heard his gasping breath just outside the bathroom. His shadow's gray smear leaked through the kitchen light coming under the door. She smelled oil again, stained onto his hands. The blood of engines, and he'd left a black streak of it on her wrist.

Anne couldn't bear the image of herself in the mirror anymore, so she clicked off the night-light with her shivering thumb. Now there was only the light shaft under the door. She peeled both her socks away—the blood on the left heel already drying. She stepped backwards onto the cold porcelain bottom of the tub. Never had she navigated that tiny bathroom in full darkness. She reached for surfaces that seemed to evade her touch.

"Anne? What are you doing in there?" Richard said. His boots shifted and his shadow grew.

Anne remembered the barber's scissors stored in the medicine cabinet, but she couldn't imagine piercing them through his skin and the tough red muscle beneath, forcing her arm to stab and stab until he collapsed. Her own flesh clenched with the notion.

"Please bring me some clothes?" she said.

"No. We're just waiting for Gloria. Like I said."

"I'm cold. And I'm scared. If you just bring me some pants, or a shirt. They're in my closet."

"I ain't going back in there. I messed up bad in there. I don't want to see that again—you know? I had too much to drink before—all this vodka."

"Please bring me a blanket—something."

"Shut up!" He kicked the door and the hinges crackled where they were bolted into the wooden frame. "I did it already. I can do it again to you, so shut up!"

Anne's legs gave way, bringing her down to her knees near the drain coated with mildew and soap scum. Scented like fruity shampoo. She pulled the shower curtain shut—another flimsy, useless barrier. Each second she confronted the miracle of her brain still working.

"Just calm down in there." Richard spoke carefully, word by word. "It's going to be over soon."

"Don't," Anne said.

"Nobody needs to freak out, right?"

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"I don't know."

"You know. Don't screw with me. You know."

When she ran the hot water it came out rippling. At first her cupped hands stopped the water from slapping the tub bottom, but then it overflowed. It kept flowing and rising, hugging around her knees, channeling between her toes. Anne pressed her face under the surface of the water. Her ears filled and sang with the surge of the faucet. She was alive, but just yards away Daniel was dead and growing colder. She thought of his parents, all his relatives, who'd raised him for so long. She had taken him away from his family who had nurtured him and then she let him die. She hadn't done anything to stop it.

They met Richard in a bar. Anne perched on a barstool bolted to the floor. Around her, spotlights dragged bright colors past silhouettes on the dance floor. Limbs flailed, blurred and artless. She tugged downward at her skirt hem that kept rising up her thighs. Gloria had been there, too, seated near Anne at the table, until she excused herself for the bathroom, only for a few minutes. They'd just become roommates and were celebrating here at Club Helium, where hovering balloons were anchored by ribbons, glowing like oriental lamps in the background studio lighting.

Gloria's whiskey sour billowed in its glass while Anne waited for her to come back. She raised her head and scanned wide-eyed through the crowd for Gloria's face. Someone watching, a stranger, might've mistaken Anne's impatient glances for another kind of desperation. A guy like the one who approached her then, with his polyester shirt untucked and unbuttoned, tank top beneath, and his prickled hair moussed wet against his scalp. Rising from his pinched fingers was a ribbon tied to a balloon that was white and weightless as a pure human soul might be.

He leaned toward her, straining over the music, "You sitting this one out? You look pretty relaxed. I thought this balloon would be your color, you know?"

He tried to pass the ribbon, but Anne missed. The balloon swooped silently off toward the rafters. She could only face him for an instant—enough to notice the brilliant fractal defect in his left eye, a pupil spilling its blackness everywhere.

"I'm Rich, if you want to know," he said.

Behind him Gloria hurried back to the table, bristling with big white teeth and painted lips and undulant black hair. Anne knew Gloria would divert the stranger's interest; Gloria would save her.

In the bathtub Anne held her breath underwater until her throat heaved, until she believed she could hear Gloria's voice wading into her ears from the kitchen.

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"—showing up here uninvited," Gloria said. She was in the kitchen with Richard, just beyond the door.

Anne's ears drained. She sucked in moldy air. The shadows under the bathroom door were crossing and shifting now.

"How many times I got to apologize, Glory?" Richard said. "I don't even know 'cause I got nothing else except for you. You think I give a crap for anything else?"

"Keep your voice down," Gloria said. "Anne and Danny are in here—I can't believe you just walk in, I mean—" she dropped her voice to a level meant only for Richard "—they're supposed to be getting intimate in there."

"I don't care about them. I came for you."

"You're so considerate, Rich."

"Where'd you go? I been waiting here."

"On a date. I went on a date. Does that make you mad, Richard? You going to strangle me because I'm trying to forget about you?"

Anne's muscles clenched as if all this language had come from her own mouth. Richard's silence loomed so heavy with secret and peril that it became Anne's silence too; it kept her implicated in this poised disaster.

"Who was it? On the date?" Richard said. He still sounded cautious, as if waiting on a breath for Anne to scream, for Gloria to smell death on him, for his own rage to spatter. It must have sounded to Gloria like calm.

"Never mind who it was. You don't know him. Besides, the whole thing sucked anyway. I'm through, I'm saying."

Knuckles rapped on the bathroom door. "Anyone in there?" Gloria asked. Her voice spilled through the door, splitting boundaries. The water rippled with Anne's shudder. She clenched her eyes and waited for Richard to strike with another knife or something else that he was keeping concealed, maybe down the back of his shirt.

"I locked it on accident," Richard said.

"You just need to lift the door like this," said Gloria. She grunted as the door slammed upward against its frame. "The stupid lock comes undone really easy."

Anne shifted onto her back and dunked her nose and mouth underwater. The ripples fell stagnant just as Gloria bustled into the bathroom. Anne flinched against the onrush of light, but she watched her roommate through a hairline split between the shower curtain and the stall.

And Anne could see behind Gloria where Richard hunched in a seat at the kitchen table with his back to the open bathroom door and his shoulders trembling. He tilted his head with one ear perked, listening for an outcry. But Anne knew the danger her voice would summon. If she uttered a warning, even whispered, he'd surely stab them both dead. So she swallowed all her noise deep into her chest.

Gloria lowered herself down onto the toilet seat. She fingered

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the silky hem of her thigh-high nylons like an intimacy. "What are you getting yourself into?" Gloria whispered. Anne winced, but then she understood that Gloria was talking to herself.

"Oh, sick—" Gloria said. "Come here, Rich—look."

Anne's airless lungs ached. She peered but could not see what Gloria was lifting from beside her feet. A chair scraped the kitchen floor, and there was Richard in the doorway—his unshaven face and those black-stained hands. His one undamaged eye scanned everywhere, even the ceiling, until it fixed upon the open edge of the shower curtain through which Anne saw him. His blind, shattered eye saw nothing.

"They must've—you know," Gloria said. " 'Cause look at—she cleaned up her blood with this sock and just left it here. Think I should go rail on her, knock on her door?"

"No," Richard said.

Gloria said, "What are you all grumpy about? I told you the date sucked. I was going to call you tonight anyways, maybe even ask you to come over. But as usual you jumped the gun. Lucky I'm feeling forgiving."

The toilet flushed, and Anne lifted her nose from the water. She inhaled a breath filled with Gloria's sweet berry perfume. Gloria ground her body into Richard's. She took his limp hand and pressed those grimed fingernails around her hips. But Richard's dead sparkling eye still watched Anne, watched until Gloria flicked the light away.

How long Anne waited beneath the water and behind the curtain—she couldn't count the minutes. She measured time by the distant thump of Gloria's bedroom door, their voices and bodies settling into bed, Gloria's smoky laughter, the steady chilling of bath water, ripple by ripple.

She wanted to remain until events reversed themselves, but her mind kept firing her muscles to run. She imagined escaping without her body, slipping upward from it through the bathroom ceiling and the apartment above, floating into the night air. She wanted to find Daniel in the ether and mingle with the particles of his afterlife. From ceiling height she watched her body dripping and cast in blue. Those limbs and ribs and spine were no more than any collection of bones, but she stayed tethered to them by nervous cords, webbed in dendrites and axons.

She wanted to cut those bonds—even as her body began to quicken, peeling back the shower curtain, slumping and slipping over the tub rim like a new birth. She watched her naked bones stand upright and walk, dripping bathwater onto the kitchen linoleum, gaining strength. She saw herself slump against the kitchen counter, saw her own hand draw another long blade from the knife block. She watched herself with that knife and believed that she could use it. ●

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Art by Jason C. Eckhardt

ONCE ABOARD THE EAGLE

by Edward D. Hoch

The business that brought Ben Snow to Sacramento early in 1885 had been satisfactorily concluded, and he boarded the train on Sunday morning for the return trip to Carson City, where he'd stabled his horse Oats. The train was called the Eagle, but with its broad smokestack and cowcatcher up front it hardly looked like any sort of bird. The trip was a short one of just a few hours, so he fully expected to be eating dinner in the Nevada capital that afternoon. But as the train passed through the cornfields just outside of Sacramento a young woman's voice was to change those plans.

"Is this seat occupied?" she asked. It was not, of course, and Ben smiled at her as he removed his saddlebags and placed them on the floor by his feet. She wore a long blue velvet skirt with matching hat and white blouse, in a style he'd seen on the Sacramento streets. There was an empty seat across the aisle but the man with the black handlebar moustache and dark suit seated by the window was enough to make any single woman think twice.

"Are you going to Carson City?" Ben asked, eager for conversation.

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She studied him for a few seconds before replying. "No, I'm traveling all the way to Ogden, Utah." He guessed her to be about his age, in her mid twenties.

"I was wondering. Carson City is still a pretty rough place for a young lady, even though it's the state capital."

She eyed him with something like amusement. "Were you offering to escort me to my hotel?"

"I might have been."

"You're a cowboy, aren't you? I'll wager you have a brace of pistols in your saddlebags."

He smiled back at her. "You'd lose that wager. I have only one. But tell me what's taking you all the way to Ogden. That's a two-day journey."

"Why should I tell you? I don't even know your name."

"It's Ben Snow. Ever hear of me?"

"No. Ever hear of Samantha Gaines?"

"I've heard the name mentioned often." His reply startled her, wiping the sly smile from her face. Her change of expression made him laugh. "No, no, I'm only joking. That's you, I suppose."

"It is." She'd turned stern, but he knew that wouldn't last for long. "And if it's any of your business, I'm traveling to Ogden to protest the killing of buffalo by trainloads of Eastern sportsmen."

Ben nodded, aware of the problem. Railroad and business executives, often with their wives, organized hunting parties with officers from frontier army posts. With an escort of soldiers to protect them from Indians, they traveled west by special trains to the areas where herds of buffalo still grazed near the tracks. The carcasses of their prey, shot from the trains, were often hung from the caboose on the return trip.

Before he could reply, the conductor came through collecting their tickets and money. He was a bony man wearing a brass-buttoned jacket and a flat peaked cap with a nameplate that read *Central Pacific*. "First trip on the Eagle?" he asked.

"For me it is," Samantha admitted.

"This is one of the best trains on the Central Pacific line," he told them. "See these high ceilings and fresh varnish? You won't find that on those old Union Pacific cars east of Ogden. These new cars

Edward D. Hoch is not only one of the world's most prolific writers, he's a voracious reader, and his advice to new writers often includes his belief that from wide reading ideas will flow. He is also a careful researcher; the information he employs in this story about train travel in the Western states in 1885 comes from Robert Louis Stevenson's travel book *Across the Plains*, which was serialized in 1883, published in 1892.

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are airier, and you don't need bed boards for sleeping. Our seats draw out and join in the center. We have this upper tier of berths that are closed by day but open at night."

"That's good to know," Ben agreed.

"Here's a little map of our route, with the stops indicated. We stop for breakfast in the morning, dinner between eleven and two, and supper sometime between five and nine. At all other times you can purchase fruit, lollipops, and cigars from Jimmy the newsboy. You'll see him coming through the train. He also sells books and newspapers. My name is Bill Wallman, if you need anything else."

"How many cars are on this train?" Ben asked.

"It varies. Today we have seven. There's the engine and coal car, followed by the baggage car and the Chinese car. On the westbound trips with emigrants we sometimes need two or three baggage cars. Then there's this car for men and women traveling without families, followed by the family car and the caboose."

"Why are the Chinese kept separate?" Samantha asked Ben after the conductor had moved on. "Wasn't it Chinese labor that laid most of these tracks?"

"They work cheaper than American labor. Somehow that makes them a threat."

It wasn't long afterwards that Jimmy arrived to introduce himself and show his wares. He was a bright smiling lad of sixteen or seventeen, carrying his products on a wooden tray supported by a strap around his neck. "I also have soap, towels, and washing-dishes for the mornings," he explained.

"I'll be leaving the train this afternoon at Carson City," Ben explained. "My horse is stabled there."

"Sorry to see you go," the boy replied. "It's great country across northern Nevada. We pass through lots of old mining camps."

Samantha had noticed the conductor paying special attention to a well-dressed man a few seats ahead of them. "Who's the white-haired gentleman?" she asked Jimmy. "He looks important."

"He is! That's Hiram Killcanon, the California state senator. He rides the Eagle to Ogden every few months. Meets up with a trainload of Easterners for some buffalo hunting. He's so good at it his friends call him King Buffalo."

"Do they, now!" Samantha exclaimed. "I just might need to have a talk with him."

After Jimmy had gone on his way Ben tried to calm her down. "I don't think you want to confront him on the train like this."

"Oh, don't I? That's the reason for my journey to Ogden, to protest against this buffalo slaughter!"

She left her place and moved down the aisle to the seat where the white-haired senator was chatting with a woman Ben couldn't

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see. Samantha spoke to him and he glanced up. She said something else Ben couldn't hear and suddenly Killcanon was on his feet. "See here, young lady—" The woman reached out a restraining hand, but not fast enough. He slapped Samantha across the cheek.

There were gasps from the other passengers who'd witnessed the altercation, and Ben ran down the aisle to her side. "That was uncalled for, sir," he told the politician.

"Perhaps you didn't hear her foul language," Hiram Killcanon replied.

Ben was about to strike the man, but Samantha said, "He didn't hurt me. It was nothing compared to shooting a harmless buffalo."

Ben turned with some reluctance and led her back to their seat. He'd had only a glimpse of the senator's companion, a middle-aged woman with black hair and thick eyebrows, wearing a soft felt hat. "Was that his wife with him?"

"With King Buffalo, you mean? I don't know. Probably his mistress."

"Calm down. At least you let him know how you felt." He noticed that the moustached fellow across the aisle had been watching it all with interest.

Before long, a young man who'd been seated across from Killcanon and the woman made his way back to Samantha's seat. "The senator has asked me to apologize for the earlier incident. He's deeply sorry he struck you."

"Who are you?" Ben asked.

"Ralph Munsey. I'm Senator Killcanon's personal aide." He looked the part, clean-shaven with a dark suit and string tie. "He would like to buy you dinner when we stop in Carson City."

"That won't be necessary," she replied somewhat coolly. "But I accept his apology."

"I wish—"

"Please," she said, holding up her hand. "It is a dead issue with me."

Munsey retreated, and Ben said, "You handled that well."

"I certainly wasn't going to have dinner with him! It would probably be buffalo meat!"

The senator's female companion came back past their seats but ignored them, edging by Jimmy with his tray of sundries. "I have some nice apples," the newsboy pointed out.

Ben took some coins from his pocket. "Give us two."

"Want me to slice them for you?"

Samantha shook her head. "They're more fun if you munch right into them."

The apple tasted good to Ben, too. "Do you just ride the train all week?" he asked the youth.

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"My run is from San Francisco to Ogden and back again. When the passengers switch to the Union Pacific line I turn around. They supply their own newsboys. The round trip takes four days and I usually get a day off between trips."

"You're from San Francisco?" Samantha asked.

"Yeah. I live there with my mom."

"How'd you land a job like this?"

Jimmy's smile turned momentarily somber. "My dad worked for the state. He was killed in an accident and they wouldn't give us any compensation for it. I had to quit school to help support my mom. I was lucky to land this job. You get to see all sorts of people on trains."

Ben had to agree with that. Up ahead, he could see the conductor arguing with a short Chinese man attempting to enter their car. Finally Bill pushed the man bodily through the door to the Chinese coach. "What was all that about?" he asked Jimmy.

"The Chinese car is crowded. That's Wu Khan. He's traveled with us before and he asked me if he could sit in here where there are empty seats. I told him he'd have to ask the conductor."

"I guess he got his answer," Samantha commented.

Jimmy moved on and as they munched their apples Ben remarked, "Maybe you should try to help the Chinese instead of the buffalo."

"It's hardly the same thing. The buffalo are being shot dead."

When the conductor announced they were about a half-hour outside of Carson City, Samantha excused herself to use the toilet at the front end of the car. Ben noticed that Killcanon's female companion was headed in the same direction, as was the man with the moustache across the aisle. All the passengers seemed to be on the move and Jimmy was having difficulty squeezing past them with his tray.

Ben stood up to stretch and Senator Killcanon came back to say a few words. "I trust Ralph delivered my apologies."

"Certainly," Ben told him. "Everything's fine."

He nodded and turned back toward his seat. Ralph Munsey was standing, too, perhaps calculating the wait for the toilet, and Killcanon had to squeeze past him. Some Indian braves had ridden up, waving peacefully to the passengers as they kept pace with the train, and Ben's attention was diverted to them. He didn't see what happened next.

It was a woman who screamed first, and for an instant he thought it was Samantha. Then he saw that it was Killcanon's dark-haired companion, returning from the toilet. The senator had crumpled to the floor as the conductor and Jimmy tried to reach him. Munsey stood frozen by his seat, trying to determine what

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had happened. "He's bleeding!" the woman shouted at him. "Do something!"

Hiram Killcanon died within minutes, without making an intelligible sound. His face seemed to register nothing more than surprise, and by the time they ripped away his bloody vest and shirt to reveal the fatal knife wound it was too late. "Who did this?" Wallman, the conductor, demanded. "One of you must have seen something!"

Ben found himself standing next to the dead man's companion, who was still sobbing quietly. Though she wore no wedding ring, he asked, "Are you Mrs. Killcanon?"

"No. No, just a good friend. Maude Gregory. We like to shoot buffalo together." Munsey came to her side then, trying to comfort her. Once again Ben was aware of the dark-haired man with the handlebar moustache, watching them intently.

"Did you see anything, ma'am?" the conductor asked her.

"No." She tried to wipe away the tears. "I don't know! The Indians distracted me. What happened to him? Was it that Chinaman who tried to come back here?"

"Did you see him at the door?"

"I don't know. I might have."

Wallman raised his voice, speaking to everyone in the car. "The Carson City police will want to question everyone here. Try to remember if you saw or heard anything unusual. We'll try not to fall too far behind schedule."

Twenty minutes later the sheriff of Carson City boarded the train with several deputies. Hiram Killcanon's body was removed after a brief examination and the deputies began a search of the car and its occupants for the murder weapon. They turned up nothing but a penknife in Ralph Munsey's pocket and hatpins in the ladies' bonnets, all incapable of inflicting the fatal wound. It was Maude Gregory who mentioned again that she might have seen the Chinaman at the door between the cars. "Wu Khan," the conductor said. "Wu Khan is his name. I've had trouble with him before."

The sheriff quickly located the Chinese man in the forward car, and found a six-inch knife in his possession. The blade showed no trace of blood, but when the deputies failed to uncover any other knife, Wu Khan was taken into custody. They'd been in Carson City over two hours when Wallman announced that the train would continue on to Ogden. All passengers remaining in Carson City were now free to leave. Ben glanced around for the mystery man with the moustache and finally saw him coming out of the station telegraph office, returning to the train.

"You'll be going," Samantha Gaines said to Ben.

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"It's my stop. I have to get my horse." He hesitated. "Look, I think we both know Wu Khan didn't kill that man. When Maude Gregory and that fellow Munsey tell their story to the sheriff, about Killcanon slapping you, they may come after you."

"I didn't—" she started to protest.

"I know, but I've got a few days free. I can ride up to Ogden with you and then take the train back." In truth, he had more than a few days free. The summer stretched before him without any certainty of a job. It would mean riding across the range from one ranch to another, looking for work.

"I'm sure they wouldn't accuse me of anything like that." But her certainty seemed to fade away as she spoke. Maude Gregory had boarded the train and taken the seat she'd occupied earlier. Ralph Munsey came on right behind her. "What are they doing here? Are they going on to Ogden without him?"

"It's beginning to look that way." Ben left his seat. "I'll find out."

Munsey was still settled across the aisle from the woman, as if reluctant to occupy the dead man's seat. Ben had no such qualms. "It's a terrible thing that happened to Senator Killcanon," he said quietly.

She looked up, startled at his sudden appearance in the seat next to her. "What do you want?"

"Only to express my sympathies."

At the front of the car the conductor called out, "All aboard the Central Pacific Eagle! Next stop Dutch Flat! All aboard!"

Munsey leaned across the aisle to tell the woman, "I believe that was supposed to be our dinner stop."

"I couldn't eat a thing, Ralph. Stop thinking of your stomach all the time. Hiram is dead, after all."

"Sorry," he said, and fell silent.

"Are you going on to Ogden?" Ben asked her.

Maude Gregory nodded. "The trip meant so much to him. He would have wanted us to go on. Besides, his wife will be making arrangements for his body. There's nothing for me to do in Carson City."

"Do you hunt, too?"

She nodded solemnly, as if he'd asked whether she was a churchgoer. "My buffalo gun is up front in the luggage car."

"We couldn't see what happened earlier. Who stabbed him?"

"They say it was that Chinaman. I don't know. I was distracted by the Indians riding by."

Ralph Munsey interrupted again from across the aisle. "Yeah, well, it might have been that woman who caused the trouble earlier. She was up this way when it happened."

"I don't think she was involved," Ben said, rising to return to his seat.

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"She a friend of yours?" Munsey asked.

"I never saw her before. She's just a seatmate."

It was after dark when they reached Dutch Flat, an old mining camp now almost deserted. A sheep train was passing in the opposite direction as they came to a stop and Ben could hear the bleating of the unhappy animals inside the cars. "There's not much left in Dutch Flat," Bill Wallman admitted, removing his conductor's cap to scratch his head. "Places like this will be ghost towns in another few years. But the locals usually prepare some food to sell the passengers. We only stop for twenty minutes and I yell 'All aboard' just once. I don't take roll call."

Samantha Gaines went in search of food and Ben stayed on the train, munching another apple from Jimmy and chatting with the conductor. "Do you often have stabbings on this run?" he asked.

Wallman shook his head. "Hardly any. At these little mining towns we sometimes take on passengers wearing guns, but they usually behave themselves. Had a couple of Mexicans in a knife fight last year, but nobody got killed. This is the first politician we've lost." He looked unhappy at the thought.

"Will they hold you responsible?"

"Sure, probably. Then I'll be back working at the fish market in San Francisco. Someone like Killcanon gets killed and they have to place the blame, even if they caught that Chinaman with a bloody knife in his hand."

"I don't think there was blood on the knife they found." Ben's attention was diverted by the sight of the man with the large moustache returning to the train with a bag of food. He dropped his voice and asked the conductor, "Who is that man?"

"I have no idea. He's booked through to Ogden."

Ben was remembering the man leaving the telegraph office in Carson City. Had he sent a message saying his mission was accomplished, that Senator Killcanon was dead? Or merely that the train had been delayed?

When they were under way again and the hour was late, Ben helped Samantha get the beds into position. Though he readily offered to sleep in the upper bunk, she seemed to feel safer up above. Jimmy came by with a stool to help her up. Sleeping on a train, with the clatter of wheels on track, didn't come easy to Ben, and he was surprised he drifted off as quickly as he did.

Bill Wallman's husky voice awakened him, shortly after daybreak, with the announcement to all passengers that the breakfast stop would be made in thirty minutes at Alta, another of the tiny mining towns that dotted northern Nevada. Samantha poked her head out of the upper berth to say good morning and Ben offered to bring her breakfast if she didn't want to go out for it.

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She readily agreed and he soon returned with milk and coffee cakes. At the other end of the car he could see Munsey bringing food for Maude Gregory's breakfast.

"What do you think?" Samantha asked as they ate. "Maybe it was a love triangle. Maybe Munsey stabbed his employer so he could have that woman."

"She's a good ten years older than him," Ben observed, "though that doesn't rule out the possibility."

They'd been awakened so early that the rest of the day passed by endlessly as the Eagle traveled through deserts of alkali and sand that made even the occasional stretches of sagebrush seem somehow scenic. They lunched early at Elko and the conductor announced they'd be in Toano that evening, then across the state border to Ogden by morning.

The evening stop took longer than expected, because the engine had overheated, delaying them for more than an hour. Most of the passengers left the train for a stroll, and some young men from the family car gathered at the rear caboose for an impromptu round of songs. "That's nice," Samantha told Ben as they strolled, listening to "The Sweet By and By." "Almost makes you want to settle down here."

"Not me," he told her. "I need the sight of cattle and grazing land, not alkali plains."

"Do you ever think about moving to the coast?"

"Not really. When I'm too old to herd cattle I'll probably head east."

"That's a long time away."

There was someone up ahead, silhouetted against the lantern light from the train. It took Ben a moment to recognize his mystery man with the moustache. "Could I speak to you in private?" the man asked.

Ben drew a breath and told Samantha, "Go back to the train. I'll be right along."

She agreed with some reluctance, and when Ben was alone with the man he said, "You're Ben Snow, the man some say is Billy the Kid."

"Billy's dead." Ben replied. "I'm just Ben."

"But you're fast with a gun, like Billy. Want to draw on me?"

"I'm unarmed. You can see that."

The man grinned, and for an instant his teeth reflected the lantern light. Ben sprang forward as the man's hand dipped inside his coat. It came out holding a tiny short-barreled derringer, but by that time Ben had a firm left-handed grip on his wrist. With his right fist he launched a short, sharp jab to the man's jaw that sent him backwards in a dazed heap. Ben found his wallet and

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flipped it open to an identification card that read: *Philip Atlas, Investigator, Pinkerton's National Detective Agency.*

"You're a detective?" he asked the stunned man.

Atlas struggled to his feet, holding his jaw. "I've killed men for less than that."

"Not when they're holding your gun. What are you doing on the Eagle?"

"Working."

"For whom?"

"That's confidential. Pinkerton's employs me. That's all you need to know."

"You telegraphed someone from Carson City, after Killcanon's murder."

"I may have."

Suddenly it clicked in Ben's brain. "Mrs. Killcanon! She hired a Pinkerton man to follow her husband on this buffalo-hunting expedition. You reported to her that he was with Maude Gregory."

He wouldn't answer, but he didn't need to. Instead, he offered a challenge. "If you're Billy, give me back my gun and we'll draw against each other."

"The gun stays in my pocket until Ogden. I'll unload it and return it to you then. Stop imagining I'm Billy the Kid if you want to stay alive. A six-gun could beat a derringer any day of the week."

He turned and walked back to where Samantha was waiting.

Finally the train rolled out of Toano, bound for Ogden. Wallman explained that anyone continuing east would transfer there to the smaller, less comfortable cars of the Union Pacific, while his train and crew turned back toward San Francisco. Ben overheard Atlas, the Pinkerton man, ask if there was any further news from Carson City about the murder, but the conductor professed to know nothing.

Ben had told Samantha of Atlas's identity, and now she wondered if Maude Gregory knew it, too. "Maybe you should tell her, Ben, let her know she's being spied upon."

"I suppose I might mention it." He went up front to where Munsey was helping the woman arrange the seats and upper berth for the night.

"One more night of this," Maude sighed. "Of course it's not very comfortable on the buffalo train, either, but at least you're among friends."

Ben waited until Munsey had moved away and then told her, "I believe you're being watched. The man at the back of the car with the black suit and large moustache is a Pinkerton detective."

She spun her head around and quickly spotted him. Ben wished

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she'd been a bit subtler about it. "I've seen that man before, back in Sacramento. I didn't realize it until this very instant."

Ben nodded. "He may have been following you for some time, if Killcanon's wife was suspicious."

She was not in the mood for denial. "I did nothing more than love a man. Is that so wrong?"

"He was married at the time," Ben reminded her gently.

"She never gave him the love I did. If that Chinaman stabbed him I would gladly put the rope around his neck myself."

"I find it hard to believe that Killcanon was the victim of a motiveless killing. Perhaps someone desired you as much as you desired him."

"If you're thinking of Ralph Munsey, there's nothing between us. I'd as soon believe your Pinkerton man killed him, on orders from Hiram's wife."

"If she hired a murder done, I think you would have been the more likely target."

He left her and went back to find Samantha already in the upper berth. "Our final night," she said with something like relief.

"That's about how Maude Gregory feels, too. But you'll be demonstrating, won't you?"

"Right in Ogden. From there the private buffalo train travels east into southern Wyoming, where most of the large herds still roam close to the tracks."

Ben smiled. "Try to get a good night's sleep. If they arrest you, tomorrow night might be spent in a jail cell."

"Thanks for that information!"

He slept well through the early part of the night, but was aware toward morning that the train had stopped. He raised the window shade to see if they'd arrived in Ogden, but saw only other tracks and a few small buildings. He got up and went to the toilet. On the way back, he found Jimmy preparing his tray for the morning trip through the train. "Are we there yet?" he asked the youth.

Jimmy shook his head. "We had to stop outside the city for some reason. I'm taking around some fruit for folks until we can get a regular breakfast at the station."

Ben bought two apples, one for Samantha, and the boy went on his way. He knocked on the ceiling above his seat and she poked her head out. "What time is it, anyway?"

"Only seven o'clock. We've stopped outside the city. Have an apple."

"Thanks. Why are we stopped?"

"I don't know. I'll try to find Wallman."

The conductor was in the car ahead trying to calm the Chinese, few of whom spoke English. "They're afraid they're going to be

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arrested, like Wu Khan. I'm trying to tell them Wu Khan has been freed back in Carson City."

"What's that?"

"It's true. The police telegraphed ahead to hold us outside the station until local officers arrive to make an arrest."

Ben's heart sank. "Who are they arresting?"

"I imagine it's that Gaines woman. Everyone saw Killcanon slap her."

He stared at the half-eaten apple in his hand. Sometimes it took a bushel of evidence to identify a killer. Other times, a single apple could do it. "Come back into our car," Ben requested. "I have something to say."

The others were up now. Ralph Munsey's eyes were blurry with sleep and Maude Gregory was just coming out of the toilet. Samantha had climbed down from her upper berth. The Pinkerton man, Philip Atlas, was conversing with one of the other passengers. "Quiet down!" the conductor urged them, and even Jimmy stopped hawking his morning wares. "Mr. Snow here has something to say."

"We've just been informed," Ben began, "that the Chinese passenger Wu Khan, arrested in Carson City, has been released for lack of evidence. Our train has been stopped outside of Ogden until the local police arrive to make another arrest. There is no doubt they now suspect Miss Gaines here because the victim slapped her in front of us all."

"I didn't kill him!" Samantha insisted. "I might have wished him dead but I didn't kill him."

"I don't think you did," Ben agreed. "From the beginning, the main mystery to me has been the lack of a murder weapon. What happened to the knife that probably had about a five-inch blade? Certainly Mr. Munsey's penknife couldn't have been used, nor the women's slender hatpins. Was there another knife in existence? If there was, the person who possessed it is almost certainly the killer. Otherwise why wouldn't he or she have admitted to the weapon during the search?"

"What are you trying to say?" Atlas asked. "I saw no knife."

"Neither did I," Ben admitted, "yet I know one existed because the killer told me so."

"Who?" Maude asked.

Ben reached over to pick another apple off Jimmy's tray. "Jimmy, could you slice this for me, as you offered to do on the way to Carson City?"

Jimmy dropped his tray and turned to run, but Ben had already grabbed his collar. The overturned tray revealed a built-in slot for

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his paring knife, and that was all anyone needed to see. Ben hustled him off the train before the outrage in the car turned to violence.

"I didn't mean to do it," Jimmy said, still firmly in Ben's grip as they reached the ground next to the train. "I saw him there, just as I'd seen him on those other trips. I knew who he was, the state senator who'd blocked the payment for my father's accident. I knew that I hated him for that, but I never thought of killing him, not until this time. The aisle was crowded and I was trying to squeeze through with my tray. His stomach was right there, with the tray pressing on it. I slanted the tray, raised it a few inches until it must have been in line with his heart. Then I felt the knife it its slot under the tray. I gripped it in my hand and pushed. Even with the blood, I guess I didn't realize at first what I'd done. I could only think of my mother, and how he'd ruined her life by blocking that state compensation."

"Why didn't you tell them?"

"I was too scared, I guess. They searched for the knife but they never looked under my tray. I kept it hidden after that."

Ben stared at the boy and a feeling of helplessness overcame him. "How old are you, Jimmy?" he asked.

"Sixteen."

"I'm only about ten years older than that myself. I'm in no position to judge you. But I know one thing. I can't allow them to arrest an innocent young woman for your crime. I'll have to turn you in to the police."

He looked at Ben with pleading eyes. "Some say you're a gunfighter. Is that true? Have you ever killed a man?"

"Yes," Ben admitted.

"Maybe somebody gave you a break when you were my age. Maybe a marshal came to arrest you and let you run away instead."

"Maybe," Ben agreed. "But—"

"Let me go. Let me go now and I swear you'll never be sorry. Tell the police what happened, but let me go."

Someone, the conductor, was coming off the train. Ben had only an instant to decide. "Go!" he said, releasing his grip. "Run!"

Jimmy broke free and started across the tracks. That was when Ben saw her. "No!" he shouted, but it was too late.

Maude Gregory stood in the freight-car door and lifted the buffalo rifle to her shoulder and shot Jimmy dead as he ran toward the rest of his life. ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

THE TUNNEL OF DEATH

by Paul Halter

Translated from the French by John Pugmire

Though Paul Halter is French (from Alsace-Lorraine), it isn't easy to find short stories by him set in France, since he mostly writes about an English detective called Dr. Twist. This new tale, the author's second for *EQMM*, is set in Le Havre, France. Mr. Halter is a great admirer of John Dickson Carr, and what he's created this time would probably qualify as a locked room mystery—the genre for which Carr was renowned.

"You seem very thoughtful, sir."

Roussel turned and studied the man who had just spoken to him and was approaching him with a friendly smile. There was undoubtedly something elegant about the fifty-year-old with the long, carefully groomed hair, but his clothes had seen better days, and he held his arm in a sling. Roussel had already made his diagnosis: one of those brave unfortunates that a stroke of fate had thrown on the street, struggling to maintain a vestige of dignity, and more in need of human contact than money.

Roussel offered a brief smile before answering:

"Thoughtful? Hard to be otherwise when we have a tunnel here that kills people."

For a few seconds, not a sound could be heard on that bleak October evening except the moaning of the wind blowing through Montmorency Street, in Le Havre.

"A tunnel?" gasped the newcomer, wide-eyed. "A tunnel that kills people? Which tunnel?"

"Why, the tunnel that houses the escalator there," replied Roussel absent-mindedly, staring in front of him through the wire-

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mesh fence which protected a short passage open to the sky, leading to a wooden door.

"An escalator? Ah, yes! That's what it says above the door."

"The biggest in Europe, nearly two hundred metres long. Thanks to this monster, it only took five minutes to reach the top of the town, otherwise... You're not from this region, are you?"

"No . . . No, I'm not from around here."

So saying, the man lowered his eyes. He was standing in front of the mesh fence next to Roussel, who inspected him discreetly, but not without a measure of sympathy. Evidently someone more used to sleeping under the stars than in a bed. Roussel was on the point of asking him how he had injured his arm, but held back.

"When you say this escalator has killed people," the man continued, now looking at Roussel with eyes of a strikingly clear blue, "I assume you mean there have been accidents?"

"No, not accidents. The escalator has killed three people, from revolver shots."

"From revolver shots? You must be joking! An escalator couldn't . . ."

"When it has been established beyond doubt that no human being could have done it, there is no other conclusion possible. Old Django warned us, by the way. He kept telling us: 'Don't shut down the escalator, don't do it. It will take its revenge, you'll see.' Nobody listened to him. Three people are dead, in circumstances which, as I said before, preclude any possibility of human involvement. An insoluble mystery, which has haunted me for years and which, every so often, brings me here at night. I stand here, in front of the fence, and I try to find an explanation. But maybe I should start at the beginning, if you're interested?"

"Very much so. But I must warn you, I'm a sceptic by nature. I don't really believe in haunted castles or other such things."

"You'll see, the facts tell it all. Several years ago, it was deemed preferable to put this escalator out of service because the funds couldn't cover the running costs. The municipal authorities set a date to shut it down, without taking into account the resentment of the people who used it, nor the warnings of old Django, a local gypsy and soothsayer. As I told you, he warned the municipal council members, buttonholing them in the street, telling them that the escalator would take its revenge if they insisted on closing it. The first murder took place the same week that the decision was announced, just at the time when people were returning home from work. In other words, at rush hour. There was the sound of a shot and a man in the middle of the escalator fell down, a bullet between his eyes. None of the people present had seen anyone pull out a weapon or make a suspicious movement. Which is pretty strange, you have to admit. There the people are, in

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Indian file on the moving stairs taking them to their destination, in a concrete tunnel offering no place to hide, each with eyes fixed on the person ahead. Nobody sees anything, and yet one of them is shot dead, right in the middle of the escalator. A few days later, the same scenario: a new victim in almost identical circumstances."

The stranger nodded his head, a smile playing on his lips. "It's certainly strange, but an insoluble mystery? Maybe not. A lapse of concentration and someone could very well have—"

"I admit that. But now listen to what happened next. Shortly after the second murder, old Django alerted Bertrand Charpie, a rich industrialist of the region and one of the country's wealthiest men, telling him that he would suffer the same fate as the two others if ever he decided to take the escalator. Needless to say, Charpie hardly ever used that means of transport, but he was the type of man who could not resist a challenge—quite the contrary! That was how he had acquired his reputation and made his fortune. And so the day before the escalator was due to be shut down, Bertrand Charpie, in defiance of the prophecy, turned up . . . here, in fact, where we are standing right now.

"It was a grey September afternoon, and there had been several showers that morning. Charpie arrived with his wife, probably to underline his unswerving disregard for danger. Even so, he was accompanied by his bodyguard Martin, an ex-policeman, and by Pierre Picard, his young brother-in-law, a past master of martial arts. The police were also there. Needless to say, the escalator had been searched with a fine-tooth comb, and two officers had been posted here to guard the entrance, with two others at the exit.

"Imagine a seemingly endless concrete tube, three metres wide and almost two hundred long, dimly lit, with wooden steps about a square metre in size, slightly wider than deep. How could anyone hide in there?

"It was about three o'clock when Bertrand Charpie stepped on the escalator with his wife, his brother-in-law, his bodyguard, and two inspectors. There was nobody on the moving steps apart from those six people, divided into three groups: Pierre Picard and one of the inspectors on the same step, ten metres ahead of Charpie and his wife, also side by side; then, ten metres behind them, Martin and the other inspector. It was in mid journey that the shot rang out: a terrifying noise, in that tunnel, and with an echo every bit as frightening. Bertrand Charpie collapsed, mortally wounded by a bullet in the chest. He died that evening. Now can you see the problem?"

"Perhaps there was a hidden passage, or some opening that would allow the killer to fire a shot?"

"Nothing like that. As you can well imagine, after a crime like that the police examined every square millimetre with a magnifying glass. Furthermore, remember that the entrance and exit were

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being watched by police officers. They were adamant that, except for those accompanying Charpie, nobody left the tunnel after the murder; and prior to that, there wasn't even so much as a cat inside. The weapon was found on the side of the escalator, between the wall and the handrail, level with the spot where Charpie fell. A Browning 7.65, with no fingerprints."

The stranger shrugged his shoulders. "So the killer can only be one of the five people who were with the victim."

"I was expecting you'd say that. First of all, please understand that the shot wasn't point-blank. The experts put it at a minimum of five metres. Which rules out Charpie's wife. In any case, the other four people were watching the couple closely and were ready to swear that there was no suspicious movement on her part at the moment the shot was fired. As for Martin and the police officer with him, standing ten metres behind the couple, each is ready to swear that the other could not have fired without being noticed. The same is true for the two people in front of the Charpies on the escalator. And I am particularly well placed to assure you that Pierre Picard could not have fired on his brother-in-law. He was as close to me then as you are now. I could see his hands; with the one, he was stroking his chin, and with the other he was holding his raincoat against his chest, a little bit like . . ."

The stranger looked at his arm in the sling with some amusement.

"Please excuse me," said Roussel. "I wasn't—"

"That's all right. No offence taken. If I've understood you correctly, you were the inspector next to him."

Roussel nodded.

"So you saw the murder committed before your very eyes?"

"Precisely. Picard and I were standing facing backwards, as we didn't want to lose sight of Charpie for an instant. We were literally petrified by the sound of the shot, and watched him clutch his chest before collapsing. His wife started to scream. . . . It was difficult to determine the angle of fire because Charpie had just turned—or was still turning—at the moment the shot was fired. It was hard for us to work it out, and we weren't helped by the extraordinary effect of the echo. According to Madame Charpie, the shot had been fired right next to her. To me, the sound seemed to have come from several places at once."

"Seen from that point of view, things look pretty strange, I have to agree. But tell me, apart from the weapon, did you find any other clues?"

"Nothing, apart from cigarette ends and scraps of paper. No, wait, there was one object that did intrigue us. We found it next to the exit, on the side of the escalator: a piece of wood with a leather strap at the end. Nobody could work out what it was. In any case,

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the murder could not have been committed with it."

Roussel stopped, intrigued by the gleam of amusement in the stranger's eye.

"Life is made of coincidences," he observed, with a sort of dreamy contentment. "On the one hand, you're a flatf—detective. And now this strange object. It's incredible . . ."

"Don't try and tell me that stick has something to do with the murder. I warn you, if you're thinking that it's some kind of ultra-sophisticated firing mechanism, you can forget about it. The experts were quite clear on that point."

"I never said that."

A long silence followed his words. Roussel had the distinct impression that the stranger had just solved the mystery. His calm and slightly condescending expression seemed to confirm that.

"From what I understand," he said, eventually, "the victim had a very forceful personality."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Roussel. "Bertrand Charpie was not at all your typical captain of industry. His audacity was legendary, he launched an extraordinary number of new endeavours, and always successfully. He had also made a very promising start in politics. Yet, despite all that, he remained a very simple man of the people. He could often be seen buying one of his workers a drink . . ."

". . . The more to exploit him. I see. I suppose that he also made grandiose philosophical speeches, preaching the love of one's neighbour and disdaining all base material things, such as money and property."

"Yes, he—"

"Do you honestly believe that it is possible to succeed as he did by following the philosophy that he preached?"

"Well, I—"

"Wasn't he really the worst kind of hypocrite?"

"Maybe," replied Roussel, noncommittally. "But what is your point?"

"Just this: Almost anybody could have held a grudge against such an individual, not least his relatives."

"That may be. But it's not the motive that's the problem, it's how the killer managed to do it. And I get the feeling," added Roussel, his eyes narrowing, "that you have an idea."

"Idea?" said the stranger, with a smirk. "I'd say I was certain."

He stopped, looked furtively about him, thought for a moment, then continued:

"Listen, I can't tell you right now, but I'm sure you'll understand everything a few minutes after I've gone. For the time being, I'll give you a clue. The killer is obviously one of the people in the tunnel at the time of the murder. Someone who has been carrying out a diabolical plan—sacrificing two innocent people so that

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Charpie's death would look like some kind of curse. And I'll bet the old gypsy's palm was crossed with silver so he would utter his dire warnings. The challenge to Charpie was also part of the scheme: being the boastful braggart he was, he couldn't have ignored it without damaging his reputation. As to how the trick was worked, I think the killer threw an exploding cigar, which he had just lit, an instant before he drew his gun, so as to create a diversion. I have to go now but, believe me, the rest will become clear to you. I'm sure of it."

Taken by surprise, Roussel watched the stranger vanish into the night. Only the flutter of a few dead leaves marked the spot where he had been standing just a moment before.

I can't tell you right now, but I'm sure you'll understand everything . . . a few minutes after I've gone.

Mad as a hatter, thought Roussel. Not only had he tried to pretend that he had succeeded where a professional like himself, Roussel, had failed over the years, but, to cap it all, he had claimed that the solution would become clear in a few minutes, as if by magic. A candidate for the loony bin, no doubt about it.

Roussel started back towards his flat, but sleep was out of the question. He ducked into a bar, ordered a double scotch, and looked at his watch: eleven o'clock. Fifteen minutes had gone by since the stranger had disappeared. He shrugged his shoulders, emptied his glass, and ordered another one. In his mind's eye, he saw the stranger with his arm in a sling. A curious individual. A tramp, as he had first thought? His eyes had been clear, not those of a wandering drunkard. Alert and mischievous . . .

Ten minutes later, he decided it was time to head home. He called for the bill and reached into his pocket, only to find his wallet had gone!

His wallet, which had contained more than half his pay.

Not only had it gone, but there was a large hole in his pocket, cut cleanly, as if by a razor.

"Listen, Roussel," said the detective superintendent, trying to remain calm. "You've got a good many years left before you retire, and probably a couple of promotions. So, if I were you, I wouldn't go stirring up old cases which neither you nor anyone—"

"Picard threw the fake cigar away just before Charpie fell, I'm absolutely certain of it. He threw it on the side, and it exploded just as the Charpies drew level with it. He was waiting for the explosion and fired on Charpie the same instant. We took the two almost simultaneous explosions as an echo. Besides, do you remember there were different witness accounts about the direction of the shot?"

"Okay, okay. Suppose that's true. How do you explain that you

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didn't see him fire, even though he was only standing a few centimetres from you?"

Roussel opened a bag and pulled out a wooden rod about thirty centimetres long, with a short, wide leather belt attached at one end. "This isn't the actual object that was found at the scene of the crime, but it's very much like it. Now, tighten the belt around my biceps, so that the rod crosses my chest horizontally. There, that's good. Now, take one of the gloves in the bag and the raincoat to hide the rod completely."

"A false arm," murmured the superintendent, in utter astonishment.

"Yes, a false arm. An old pickpocket's trick. There's also a false plaster arm and a false arm in a sling, but let's not bother with them. It's a perfect illusion, isn't it? It really looks as though the raincoat is on my arm, but my real forearm is free, behind my back. I remember Picard was wearing gloves. He was standing just as I am in front of you: almost facing me, but slightly turned so as to observe Charpie. And he simply fired on him with the hand behind his back. Granted, it's not everyone who could aim accurately in those circumstances, but easy for an experienced marksman. And I recalled that he was a combat sports enthusiast."

"Hell's bells, Roussel, you've almost got me convinced. But, tell me, how did you tumble to the answer?"

"You probably know that I often used to walk around near the escalator after it was shut down. Thinking calmly, soaking in the atmosphere of the crime scene . . ."

Looking down, and fingering the stitched-up jacket pocket, Roussel said: "One of these days, it was bound to . . . pay off." ●

Colorful Characters

by J. Masterson

Green turned white.
Boddy was dead,
taken from sight
with a pipe of lead.
Mustard is red.
Scarlet is yellow.
Boddy's still dead,
but not by a fellow.
Plum was green;
White in shock.
They had seen
the pipe with Peacock.

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

THE CARAVAN OF WONDERS LADY

by James Powell

In 1859, after the birth of his colicky, leather-lunged son and namesake, Ambrose Ganelon, founder of San Sebastiano's famous detective agency, began taking long late-night walks through the tiny principality.

Usually he kept to the city's well-lit heart, for he found something sinister in gaslight, associating it with theater illuminations and pretense. As if he could fight all this falsity by staring it down, the detective's steps often took him to the rue Babette arcade.

A few years back speculators had purchased several blocks of fine old apartment buildings there, gutted the interiors, and lowered the high ceilings, making three floors where two had been and three apartments where there had only been one, renting out these vast warrens to people who wanted a prestigious ad-dress behind a noble façade.

Then, inspired by the Crystal Palace in London and the souks of

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Libya, they had roofed over the streets before these buildings with iron and glass. Here the apartment dwellers came to escape their cramped quarters, strolling in slippers and with pipe to look in the shop windows or sitting in the cafes where they welcomed their friends as if into their own homes.

Ganelon shook his head over this confusion of indoors and out, of private and public, of day and night. At one time he thought the principality's bright young men who walked their pet lobsters and tortoises on leashes there, each creature beneath its own little shell arcade, were mocking the scene.

James Powell seems to have at his fingertips an endless supply of fascinating but little-known facts. The "pig-faced woman" referred to in this new tale was a popular sideshow act in England in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, he tells us. Another of the story's references is to the "Classic foot, which in William Blake's apprentice etcher day was how feet were supposed to look." In his story, it becomes the "Angelic foot." ¶

Now he doubted they possessed such subtlety. Cardsharps used to fleece their marks by what was called glazing, where you sat your man down with a mirror behind him showing his cards. Eventually even the dullest of marks refused to sit anywhere near a mirror. But these young men walking their pets in the arcade wore the latest thing in men's fashions, jackets with large silver buttons on whose surface the sharper could again read the mark's cards. The style had come from Fong à la Mode, the Paris fashion house owned by Ganelon's archrival, that master of pretense, the evil Dr. Ludwig Fong.

Ganelon suspected his seeing Fong behind everything was the onset of oboe madness, a common illness among players of woodwind instruments. When he mentioned this in his secret correspondence with the Mistress of Balmoral she told him the affliction was widespread in Scotland, where it was called "piper's giddy," and sent him a local nostrum for it which involved oatmeal and sheep tallow.

There were other evenings when Ganelon turned his back on the gaslight to walk through rougher neighborhoods still lit by sperm-whale oil lamps, which gave off a mellower light reminiscent of his childhood. These walks always ended at the Forest Gate and the customs booth of the rue Chenier, where taxes were collected on farm goods brought into the city each day.

Tonight, as Ganelon turned onto the rue Chenier, he discovered a man and woman ahead of him on the narrow sidewalk proceeding at a stately pace. Something about the couple drew the detective's attention.

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Ganelon placed the man in his mid forties, his clothes modest but well cared for, his shoes polished and not down-at-the-heels. This last observation proved little, however, since Fong Novelties of Essen introduced its patented heel that could be rotated to conceal wear. The only thing exceptional about the man was his tan bowler hat, a color, Ganelon understood, popular for seashore wear in England, where the salt air gave black bowlers a greenish tint.

The woman wore a long snuff-colored surtout reaching to the ground and a brimmed rice-straw hat with a veil so heavy a beekeeper would have envied it. Stockier and stoop-shouldered, she was taller than the man by a good inch. Though her companion held her by the elbow, she seemed to be setting the pace.

As he speculated, the couple abruptly swung around and came toward him. Caught off guard, Ganelon quickly stepped from the sidewalk to let them by, tipping his hat as he did.

The man solemnly returned the compliment as they passed. A pace or two later the woman turned back to look at the detective for a moment through her veil.

The set of the woman's shoulders and the cock of her head as she did touched a dim corner of Ganelon's memory, something too distant to be recalled. He stood watching in the gutter until the couple reached the corner and disappeared from sight.

And here was another thing. As they passed, Ganelon had been surprised by a familiar odor. The man smelled of eau de Tancredi, a toilet water concocted by the monks of Cologne especially for San Sebastiano's royal house. As a privy counselor to Prince Conrad, Ganelon received a bottle of eau de Tancredi each Christmas. But how had this man come by his?

The answer to the riddle of the toilet water came that very next morning when Prince Conrad sent for Ganelon, a not unexpected summons. For several weeks now the newspapers had been filled with stories about Prince Conrad's son, Prince Charles (Charlot Bon-Vivant or Good-Time Charlie, as he was popularly known) and his love of the moment, the spirited and tawny-haired ballerina Editha Simonova. The prince often sought Ganelon's advice on matters connected with Charlot's romantic liaisons.

Simonova had arrived two months ago with the Kiev Ballet to dance Nino Briquet's ballet *The Man in the Iron Boot* at the Theatre Royale. (The House of Tancredi had been founded by Sixto the Sinister, whose name inspired the story of an extra toe on the Tancredis' left feet. The ballet retold a fifteenth-century legend that a Tancredi prince believed killed at the Battle of Lepanto returned home to reclaim the throne only to be thrown into the Chateau Gai prison by his usurping younger brother, who placed an iron boot on the captive's left foot to conceal the telltale toe.)

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Ganelon entered the palace by a rear entrance. When Charlot's romances heated up, an artist from *La Presse Illustrée* often lurked near the main entrance armed with a boxwood block and a pencil to sketch Ganelon's arrival, which would appear as a woodcut in the next issue.

As a chamberlain escorted him up the servants' staircase to the prince's apartment they passed the very man Ganelon had seen on the street the night before, coming down the stairs carrying a leather satchel. The chamberlain turned back to say, "Gordon, I hope you haven't forgotten our rehearsal this morning at eleven." In a quiet but firm voice the man assured him he had not.

When Ganelon raised an inquiring eyebrow the chamberlain informed him that Gordon Stevens was the prince's new English barber. "His highness is pleased with him. The man is discretion itself. And his trumpet will be a valuable addition to the household orchestra."

"Have you met his wife?" the detective ventured.

The chamberlain looked away. "Does he have one?" he asked. "Gordon declined accommodations here which go with his position. I thought he might be living with a woman to whom he is not married."

Ganelon found Prince Conrad, his chin clean-shaven and his blond dundreary whiskers smelling of eau de Tancredi, sitting regally in an armchair at his desk. Standing next to him was Baron Marcel Bollard, wearing an ancient hat resembling a thick pancake decorated with a peacock feather and a long blue cape emblazoned with a winged snail in gold.

"You know our Dean of the College of Arms, of course," said the prince.

Ganelon suspected that Baron Bollard, a man quite undistinguished in every way except for his sallow gooseberry complexion, had gone into the field of heraldry because he thought the regalia might give him some dash. The detective bowed. "Good morning, Eminent Slime Dragon Volant," he said. Calling the baron by his official title never failed to make the man flinch. The Flying Snail, or Great Worm of the Maxima, figured prominently in San Sebastiano's folklore.

A democrat, Ganelon had little interest in ancestry or the cluttered quartering of arms or where the Eagle of Prussia roosted, the Lion of Brunswick roared, the Towers of Braganza stood or where the Lilies of the Bourbons and the Cabbage Roses of the Tancredis bloomed.

"I see that Your Highness has other business to discuss," said Baron Bollard. "I will withdraw. I am sorry the *Almanac de Gotha* could be of no help in this matter." The man took his leave in a

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swirl of emblazoned cape.

"Are you aware of Charlot's love of the moment?" the prince asked the detective when they were alone. Ganelon nodded and the prince opened a desk drawer and took out a satin ballet slipper. "Charlot showed me this," he said. "He called it a love token from his Editha."

Ganelon examined the slipper and looked inside. It was said that no two ballet slippers are the same, each dancer inserting the wadding to make themselves most comfortable. Editha's foot was most unusual.

"See how the second toe is more prominent than the big toe?" asked the Prince. "Do you recognize the Angelic foot?"

Ganelon nodded. He knew the story. In the sixth century two young English princes had visited Rome as an adventure, disguised as slaves. Struck by their beauty, Pope Gregory the Great asked where they came from. Not *Angli* but *angeli,* he had insisted. His words were not lost on Rome's artistic community. From that day forward the English visitors' form, face, and feet became the standard for angels and holy men in chapel ceilings and cathedral frescoes. In fact, Ganelon owned an engraving by the English artist and poet William Blake, "Joseph of Arimathaea among the Rocks of Albion," which displayed quite clearly the Angelic foot.

"That slipper got me thinking," said the prince. "What if Editha were of English royal blood? After all, opera singers take on Italian stage names. Why shouldn't a ballerina take a Russian one? Editha sounds more English than Russian." He stroked his whiskers thoughtfully. "I mean, wouldn't that be wonderful?"

Ganelon grunted. He knew Charlot got his way with women by offering marriage, secure his father would forbid the wedding because they were not of royal blood.

The prince closed his eyes, and his face took on a dreamy expression. "When heads of state gather, we Tancredis are always seated with the petty potentates, never at the head table with the kings and queens, the presidents and prime ministers. But if Editha has English royal blood, that could all change."

The prince opened his eyes. "Look into this matter for us, Ambrose. If my boy runs true to form, in a week or two he'll propose. This time, when he comes to tell me, he may be in for a big surprise." The prince turned dreamy again. Then he saw that Ganelon was watching and he cleared his throat and added a quick, "It's high time the boy settles down and starts a family."

When Ganelon left the palace, he went directly to the commissariat of police to check the information Editha Simonova gave the authorities on entering the country. As he headed toward the record office, he passed the gaunt figure of Police Commissioner Medocq. They did not exchange greetings. Ganelon had to smile.

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Medocq reminded him of a court fool named Captain Cloux who died of the sullens because his royal master brought another fool to court. Rather than a fool, Ganelon saw himself as a guardian angel to the House of Tancredi, whose princes all had a large dash of the simpleton in their composition.

At the records office, he handed in the ballerina's name and, as an afterthought, that of Stevens the barber as well. The dusty old clerk dottered away, returned in a moment with the ballerina's card. Ganelon sat down with it at a table by the window.

Name, Editha Simonova; place of birth, Kiev; nationality, Russian. No reason to read any further. That seemed to settle the matter once and for all. Ganelon sat in thought for a few moments. He was about to rise and return to the palace with the bad news when the old clerk, looking even dustier than before, came over to lay a faded folder in front of him.

Ganelon opened it to find Gordon Stevens's fresh white entry card. Place of birth, London; nationality, British subject; marital status, single. Behind the form were several yellowing items from an older, more suspicious time when the forces of reaction saw treachery at every turn and policemen like then Sergeant Medocq had to scrutinize anything out of the ordinary. And what was more unusual than a traveling sideshow called the Caravan of Wonders?

Unfolding the show's fragile handbill, Ganelon was suddenly transported back to his boyhood, when he made his living running errands for out-of-town merchants who knew him from his days as a pot boy at the Sign of the Saracen Dog before the authorities closed the place down.

One Sunday long ago, young Ganelon had gone to this very show. He read down the acts remembering: the mathematical goat, a sad-faced creature who did sums and multiplication; a parrot who sang "God Save the King" and told fortunes; and Little Boy Blue, the Welsh trumpet prodigy who played the instrument wearing nothing but a loincloth and blue body dye. Here Ganelon followed a police notation in a spidery hand and rusty ink in the margin to the entry declaration of Thomas Stevens, British subject, owner of the Caravan of Wonders, who declared Gordon to be his son.

On the bottom of this form the police wondered if the father might be connected with a family of English smugglers of the same name. They also suspected the boy to be a midget, an operative of the High Woad, the Secret Council of Welsh terrorists fighting for independence from England.

Ganelon returned to the handbill. He remembered the next act, the Persian ropedancers. He had expected tightrope performers, not a pair of turbaned dervishes who smoked hemp and then danced around in a circle going faster and faster with larger and larger grins on their faces. Could they be Jangalis, the police won-

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dered, a tribe of Persian assassins working to overthrow the Shah?

The next attraction on the handbill was Madam Stevens, the Pig-Faced Lady. She was an extra. To see "Madam at Table" Ganelon paid another sou and stood on tiptoe at the peephole. Inside, by the light of a dim oil lamp, he saw a large woman in a marmalade wig, sitting bent over a table eating cream-filled cakes with clumsy, gloved fingers. She wore a checked dress whose short sleeves revealed arms bare to above the elbow. The woman's profile was hideous and snouted, her skin's pallor accentuated by a cheek and lip rouge as red as radishes.

Suddenly, as if sensing the boy's gaze, Madam Stevens turned full round and faced the peephole with the weariest and saddest eyes young Ganelon had ever seen. Ganelon remembered the boy thinking as he turned from the peephole how sad it must be to have a face so ugly. How could she ever find a husband or earn a living except by putting herself on public display?

What surprised him now was how the hopeless set of Madam Stevens's shoulders and the cock of her head mirrored the gesture of the veiled woman on the street the night before.

Ganelon glanced back at the barber's entry card. Pinned to it was the required statement from Stevens's landlord declaring he was indeed renting an apartment to Stevens and his sister. Sister? Ganelon checked back through the contents of the folder. He found no entry card for a sister. Was she married? Had she filled out the card under another name?

This reminded Ganelon that there had been no entry card for Madam Stevens, the Pig-Faced Lady, in the old file. He tugged at his lower lip thoughtfully before jotting down the barber's address.

After lunch Ganelon went to where the barber lived, an old building in an even older section of town. The third-floor apartment was up a dusty staircase with a rope banister. He knocked on the door and waited, thinking he heard someone moving around inside. But no one came. He knocked again, placed his ear against the door, and had the distinct impression that another ear lay against the wood on the other side, listening.

Then he heard a step on the stairs and turned to find Stevens the barber carrying his leather satchel in one hand and a trumpet case under his arm. "May I help you?" asked the man frostily, having caught Ganelon listening at his door.

The detective introduced himself, was pleased when the man recognized his name, and added, "I had the pleasure of hearing you play the trumpet when you appeared here with the Caravan of Wonders many, many years ago, you and your mother."

The noise inside the apartment had grown louder, as though whoever it was had recognized the barber's voice.

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"I am something of a musician myself," continued Ganelon. "I thought I'd drop by and pay my respects." Here he stopped and waited, letting the silence grow awkward.

After some consideration Stevens relaxed, bowed, and said, "Thank you. Of course, you must come in. But would you oblige me by waiting here for a moment?" He quickly unlocked the door, opened it narrowly, and slipped inside. Ganelon could hear his voice and then the sound of a door closing within the apartment. Then the apologetic barber reappeared, opened the door wide, and ushered the detective inside.

Rooms rented furnished are all the same. The only unusual thing was the wall mirror covered with a black cloth. Stevens offered the detective a chair at a table with a map of Italy spread out on it and sat down across from him.

"I hope your mother is well," said Ganelon, nodding tentatively at the bedroom door.

"My mother died when I was born," said the barber.

Ganelon blinked. "Your stepmother, then. The woman I saw with the Caravan of Wonders."

"Perhaps I should explain," began Stevens. But here the hastily latched bedroom door sprang open and the Pig-Faced Lady of Ganelon's childhood staggered into the room. The detective rose instinctively.

The rouged cheeks, the snout as red as radishes—it was Madam Stevens or her double. She wore a simple housedress and list slippers. Then Ganelon saw her clawed hands and the sturdy legs thick with dark brown hair.

For Ganelon, this was the ultimate pretense in a world that less and less rang true! The Pig-Faced Lady was not a woman. She was a bear.

The creature looked at Ganelon with the same sad, helpless eyes he had seen through the peephole thirty years before, rooting the astonished detective to the spot. Before he could recover himself, Stevens had cupped his hand under the bear's elbow and, speaking in a soothing tone, he turned the animal around and led her back into the room. He closed the door with a firm snap of the latch.

By now, Ganelon was livid with indignation. "This is an outrage," he said, so beside himself he could barely utter the words. "What kind of man are you? What have you done to this poor creature? You are about to discover we have laws in San Sebastiano against the mistreatment of animals."

Stevens heard him out without batting an eye until the detective paused for breath. Then the barber said in his own defense, "My people were Bruinists, a Puritan sect. Perhaps you've heard of us."

Ganelon shook his head decisively, as if to deny such people existed.

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Stevens continued, "They were Puritans, but not of the sort Macaulay recently described who hated bearbaiting because it gave pleasure to the spectators, not because it gave pain to the bear. No, the Bruinists believed that setting dogs upon a bear for sport was an abomination in the eyes of God. They actively opposed the practice, coming in the night to free bears captured for that purpose and releasing them back into the wild. For this they were much persecuted as common thieves by King, Protector, and Parliament."

"I would have thought the wild would be in short supply in England," ventured Ganelon.

"Correct," said Stevens. "Most were smuggled abroad. Fortunately, my great-grandfather, an itinerant barber, discovered that beneath the fur a bear's skin is as white as yours or mine. Faces and arms shaved, they bore a passing resemblance to humans. Dressing them up in cloaks and hats, my people spirited them out of the country, claiming the bears were the sons of noblemen whom they were taking abroad to complete their educations.

"In recent years, as bearbaiting fell out of favor, we found we could buy the bears from their owners. But years of persecution had impoverished us. So my father came up with the Caravan of Wonders as a way to finance our mission, the purchase and transportation of bears to wildernesses on the Continent.

"The Madam Stevens you saw, the Pig-Faced Lady, was a bear tied to a chair and eating at a table in middling light. We called her 'Mother.' That was just our joke. Not a cruel one, I hope. Poor Mother, we tried to explain it to her but she never really understood that she was helping us free her kind. At first, her shaven face horrified her. Later she would be horrified if we left her unshaven." The tailor pointed to the wall mirror. "So we never let her see her reflection."

Ganelon frowned. "But that was thirty years ago. Beyond a bear's lifespan. She should be long dead."

"That was Mother," said the barber. He nodded toward the bedroom door. "This is Sister. And that is another story. You see, after the Caravan of Wonders left San Sebastiano we toured Europe for several years, sending money back to England to buy the freedom of other bears. But then the show fell on hard times. I had become a bit long in the tooth for a trumpet prodigy and the ropedancers were smoking more and dancing less. They took off with the parrot and the mathematical goat in lieu of wages due the night we reached Kiev."

"Kiev?" asked Ganelon, his interest in the narrative quickening.

"Yes, and that was a stroke of luck for us," said the barber. "The very next day we got word that England had outlawed bearbaiting and the last captive bear had been ransomed. All we had to do was

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release Mother into the wilderness which stood at our doorstep and our Bruinist work would be done. So we dressed her up in her finest, walked her several miles into the woods, and left Mother there with her favorite spice cake, telling her we'd be back soon.

"Our plan was to start for England that very night. But then Father had a brainstorm. You see, my skin still had a blue cast from the dye from my Little Boy Blue act. Father thought we could make some quick traveling money by advertising me as the World's Oldest Consumptive Trumpet Prodigy on His Final Concert Tour.

"Well, Kiev flocked to see me, hoping, no doubt, that I'd die in mid trumpet cadenza. So we decided to rent a theater on the Boulevard des Anglais and settled in for an extended run of the show. We ate nightly at Smith's Chop House and rented space to keep our caravan behind the Bristol Hotel."

"Sounds like Kiev had a large English colony."

"I'll say," laughed the barber. "In fact, there was a jolly little song making the rounds in the music halls, 'Oh, To Be in England Now That England's Here.' I think Mr. Browning paraphrased from it for one of his poems.

"Anyway, on our last night in Kiev we heard a scratching on the caravan door. It was Mother, her clothes all in tatters and desperate for a shave. Somehow she'd found her way back to us. But she was so shaken by the experience, we knew we could never release her into the wild again. So we had to find Sant'Ursula Maggiore."

"And just what was that?"

"A nunnery operated by the Poor Clares," explained Stevens. "You see, in the very beginning, the Bruinists had an understanding with the Franciscan friars, who took the animals from us at Calais. The males they dressed in monks' robes, guided them to some wilderness, blessed them, and let them go. The Poor Clares took the females to this secret nunnery somewhere in Italy and cared for them until they died. But many years ago, this arrangement broke down in an argument over some minor theological point or other. It now became my father's dream to find the place and leave Mother there.

"So I trumpeted our way back across Europe. That next spring, to our surprise, Mother gave birth to a little cub and died of natural causes a few months later. Father dropped me off to study at the Paris Barber College and headed for Italy with Sister, as we'd named the cub. He searched for two years and never found the nunnery. Then he and Sister returned to Paris, where he died."

Stevens tapped the map on the table. "Now my father's dream is mine," he said. "I barber to royalty until I've enough money to continue the search. Then Sister and I will set out for Italy. One day, in a town in some valley or in a village stuck on some mountainside, we will turn a corner and there it will be, Sant'Ursula Mag-

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giore. I will ring the bell at the entrance. A nun will appear and take Sister's arm and lead her inside. And Sister will understand and go without a backward look. Then my mission will be done and my own life can begin."

Ganelon stood before his office wall map of Europe and Asia, where pushpins represented the detective agency's scattered operatives. The one in the Caspian region was the closest at hand. Ganelon had sent him to investigate the activities of a Fong henchman who, Ganelon suspected, meant to kill off the world's ruling classes by poisoning Russia's finest caviar. (The henchman's subsequent arrest would be described in lurid detail in one of Austin Marchpane's Ganelon adventure stories, *The Astrakhan Collar.)* Ganelon moved the operative's pushpin to Kiev. Then he set off to the telegraphic office to instruct the man to follow the pin.

As Ganelon crossed the street, a carriage passed with a bright new crest on the door. He thought he smelled fresh paint and shook his head once more at the times he lived in. Nowadays, two noble families of limited means might club together to buy a carriage with an extra set of doors, paint on their crests, and use the carriage on alternate days. Ganelon snorted. The next thing you knew, tailors would be offering suits with two pairs of pants.

But the crest on the door prompted Ganelon to stop at the College of Arms on his way. The more obscure their lore, the closer monomaniacs kept in touch. Things would go faster in Kiev if the Eminent Slime Dragon Volant contacted his opposite number for the ancient Duchy of Kiev with a request for cooperation.

Baron Bollard wrote out the message to his colleague, the Great Horned Bat of the Near Caves and the Far, and gave it to the detective to send. The Dean of the College of Arms was so obliging that Ganelon knew he would never again be able to call the man by his hereditary title just to make him flinch.

Five days later, Ganelon's agent was back in San Sebastiano, having met with Baron Bollard's opposite number. Apparently English royal families had been seeking refuge in Kiev for centuries, beginning with Ethelred the Unready's children fleeing King Canute and his Danes. Kiev's Yaroslav the Wise made them so welcome that the heirs of Harold Hawk-in-Hand fled there, too, after the Battle of Hastings. During the Wars of the Roses, Kiev served as a refuge for English royalty. In fact, locally, the Angelic foot was called the Dnieper foot.

The Great Horned Bat of the Near Caves and the Far even provided a grove of family trees establishing Editha's claim to English royal blood.

Ganelon hurried with all this information to the palace. He

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found Prince Conrad suffering from the gout—or crystal arthritis, as some called it, because the uric acid in the blood crystallizes and seeks out the joints of the foot. He sat with a downcast expression on his face and his left foot propped on an ottoman.

Ganelon hoped the news from Kiev would cheer him up. "Allow Charlot and Editha to marry," he concluded, "and you'll certainly be sitting among kings and queens and presidents and prime ministers."

Prince Conrad uttered a deep sigh and shook his head. "That's ancient history," he said. "My boy proposed to the ballerina. She refused him. Apparently Tancredi blood is not good enough for her."

To change the subject, the prince nodded toward his propped-up foot. "By the way, I told you once that it hums. Then I told you it crackled like twigs burning. Now, at night, it sounds like someone blowing through a crude musical instrument. Like this." Prince Conrad made his hands into a hollow ball and blew into it. Then he looked inquiringly at Ganelon.

The detective shook his head. But in fact he did recognize the sound. The prince was imitating the Australian native instrument the didgeridoo. In the same moment, Ganelon remembered reading somewhere that the aborigines down under believed crystals could be used for long-distance communication. At the time, he had scoffed at the idea as absurd. Now he wasn't sure. Had Prince Conrad's gouty, six-toed foot become some kind of a wireless telegraphic receiving device?

Ganelon felt an attack of piper's giddy coming on. He excused himself and hurried home to rub oatmeal and sheep tallow into his temples. ●

Anonymous Clyde

by Will Ryan

Anonymous Clyde
Was quiet. Discreet.
The least memorable burglar you ever could meet.
No mug shot exists.
He was never ID'ed.
No fingerprints ever left coppers a lead.
Nondescript. Bland.
Transparent. Reserved.
His comings and goings went quite unobserved.
In fact, if he died
We're not sure to this day!
But it's safe to presume that he just . . . stole away.

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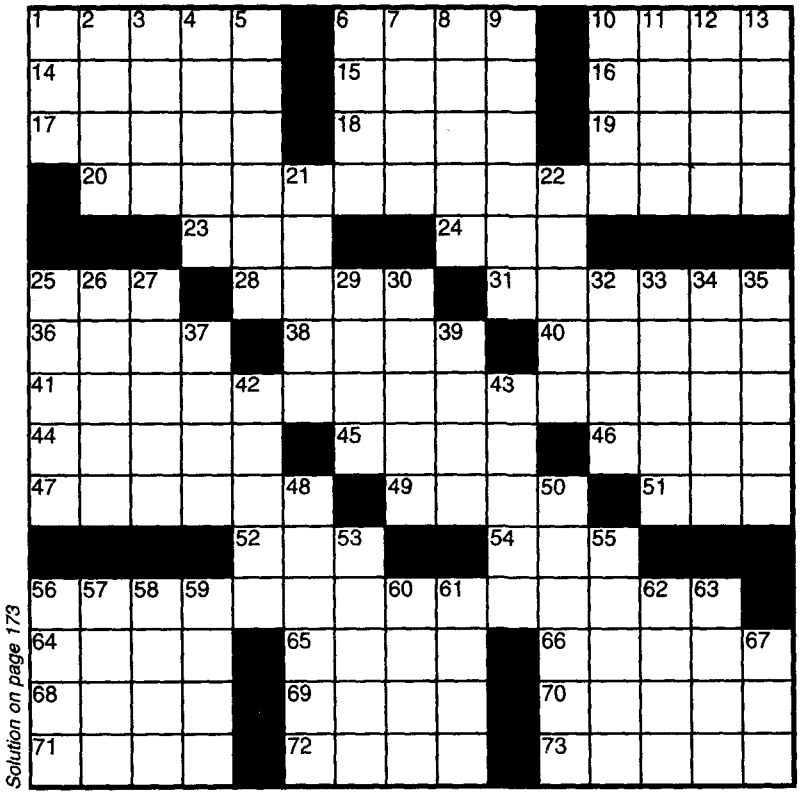
Misdemeanors or Felonies?

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 173

ACROSS

1. Pro _____, routine
6. Datum
10. P.D. James's sleuth Dalgliesh
14. Keep _____ to the ground
15. To laugh in Limoges
16. _____ *House,* James Patterson
17. Domain
18. Peter Robinson's Chief Inspector Banks
19. Came down
20. Who stole the gold paint? (Ngaio Marsh)
23. Six in Sorrento
24. Mister

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25. Berkeley campus
28. Cinch
31. Noises
36. Nil
38. Indigo
40. Entrap
41. And the answer? (Margaret Yorke)
44. He "was here" in World War II
45. Stars
46. Marcus Corvinus mystery by David Wishart
47. Utopian
49. Diner sign
51. French connections
52. "Am _____ I/A fly like thee?" "The Fly," William Blake
54. H in Greek
56. Haute couture? (Lia Matera)
64. Emend
65. *Tooth and* ____, Ian Rankin
66. *A Little* _____ *Murder,* Robert Barnard
68. French elder
69. This, Sp.
70. Jagged
71. Antelopes' playmates
72. Actor Martin in *Murderers' Row*
73. 9 Down champ

DOWN

1. Distant
2. Draft status
3. Bring up
4. Some are chocolate
5. "Where ignorant _____ clash by night," "Dover Beach," Matthew Arnold
6. Kind of house or party
7. Causes pain or uneasiness
8. Creator of Elvis Cole, Robert
9. Court game
10. Winglike
11. Salvador _____ painted "The Persistence of Memory"
12. Tamiroff, actor in *The Trial* (1963)
13. Allot
21. Biblical desert
22. Amanda, creator of Kate Fansler series
25. *Wicked* _____, Patricia Wentworth
26. Felt affection
27. To approach, in old Roma
29. Author Granger's namesakes
30. Huff
32. "_____ us a son is given," Isaiah 9:6
33. Ingenuous
34. Legal right
35. Posts
37. *The Right Hand of* _____, Lauren Haney
39. Moon goddess
42. Watching
43. Chemical compound
48. Fooled
50. Sets of steps to go over a fence or wall
53. Annoy
55. ____ *Perfect Union,* J.A. Jance
56. ____ *Lagoon,* Michael Dibdin
57. Lola Albright's role in the "Peter Gunn" TV series
58. _____ mora, without delay
59. Falco's journey
60. Sneaky's coauthor
61. Tribal division
62. Subj. for environmentalists
63. Necessary when sending an unsolicited ms.
67. _____ *Miserables,* Victor Hugo

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Soup Noir

by Robin Hathaway

I searched the aisle signs for Soup. When I found it, I scanned the shelves for the familiar red, white, and gold labels. Nowhere in sight. Odd. Wait, there they are. But something's wrong! They're black, white, and gray. How strange. Why would Campbell's give up such an attractive, well-known label for such a dull one? I turned to look at the shelves behind me, where the canned vegetables were displayed. Del Monte and Green Giant had also undergone changes. Instead of green, white, and red, they were gray, white, and black. A panicky feeling came over me. Was I going colorblind? I looked up and down the aisle for something that would reassure me. A little boy came running toward me. He had black hair, pale skin, and wore a gray sweater. I swear I'd seen him when I came in the store and his sweater was light blue. I remembered noticing how it matched his eyes and wondered if his mother had chosen it for that reason. I looked down at my feet—and my stomach lurched. My sandals were a dingy gray. They had been an electric green when I'd put them on this morning! And my toenails—"Cherry Frost" when I'd painted them last night—were now jet black!

I stumbled down the aisle toward the produce department. A clerk in a white coat was spraying water on gray broccoli.

"Excuse me. Could you tell me what color my sandals are?" I was too upset to explain my odd question.

He gave me a quizzical look before glancing down at my feet. "What color were they when you put them on?" he asked with a

Robin Hathaway is the author of two popular series of mystery novels and the winner of the prestigious Agatha Award for mysteries in the cozy genre. She began her fiction-writing career in 1999 with the first of the Doctor Fenimore mysteries, the fourth of which, *The Doctor Dines in Prague,* came out in November of 2003. Her latest novel belongs to her "Jo Banks" series. See *Satan's Pony* (St. Martin's Press 9/04). †

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mischievous grin.

"Green," I said urgently. "Bright green."

"Hmm." He rubbed his chin, and I wondered if he was deciding whether or not to have some fun with me. "You must have stepped in a puddle," he said, " 'cause they're a dirty gray now."

"And my toenails?" I was desperate.

This time he looked at me as if I really was ready for the loony bin. "Black as the ace of spades."

So it's not my eyes! I felt a wave of relief. If this clerk saw everything in black, white, and gray, there must be something wrong with the lighting in the supermarket. I would speak to the manager. I stalked to the complaint department.

The young woman behind the counter was talking on her cell phone.

"Is the manager in?" I asked rather abruptly.

She shook her head, not bothering to interrupt what I was sure was a personal call.

"When *will* he be in?" I persisted.

She shrugged and turned her back on me.

Rude!

I decided I might as well do my shopping while I waited for the manager to show up. If this was a lighting problem and not some serious eye condition, I could relax a little. I picked out a few items and dropped them in my shopping cart. I made a point of choosing things that were normally white, like fish, potatoes, and cauliflower so they wouldn't look so peculiar in my cart. I went back to the information desk twice to ask for the manager. The last time the woman was positively surly. I glanced at my watch. Almost time for *General Hospital.* Oh well, what was it to me if the supermarket had a lighting problem? I went through the checkout line.

As I stepped out into the parking lot, I almost dropped my shopping bag. All the cars were either black, white, or gray. I reached for the railing that kept the carts from rolling into the lot, for support.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" The boy in charge of the carts looked concerned.

"No, I'm not all right. What color are those cars out there?"

The boy looked puzzled. "Uh, some are black, there's a gray one, and a couple are white . . . have you lost your car?"

"No. Yes. It's a maroon Honda."

The boy peered again at the lot. "I don't see a maroon one, but there's a black Honda over there." He pointed.

"Oh, never mind."

When I reached the black car he had indicated, I looked inside. There, on the front seat, was my yellow sweater (now white) where I had left it, and the paperback mystery, *Death Is a Cold Mistress,* that I had been reading. The scarlet pool of blood on the

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cover was now black. No need to check the license plate. It *had* to be my car. Maybe it was just because it was a dull, overcast day that everything looked so bleached and sickly. Or maybe an eclipse was coming. But there had been nothing on the TV or in the paper about it. I glanced at the sky. The sun was shining. I could feel its warmth on my face.

The ground around me looked as usual—black asphalt with the dirty remains of last week's snowstorm. But across the street the normally yellow McDonald's arches and the American flag hanging outside the post office had both been drained of their colors—replaced by black, white, and varying shades of gray.

The drive home was especially nerve-racking. The traffic lights were hard to read. The red light was black and the yellow and green were different shades of gray. I thought it would be reassuring to get home among familiar things. But it was just the opposite, because familiar things *were no longer familiar.* I forgot about *General Hospital* and wandered from room to room checking out the colors (or lack of them). My living-room rug, once a lovely pastel pink, was now a sickly gray. My favorite watercolor over the dining-room table was black and white. The only thing that was unchanged was the photograph of my parents on the piano. And it had always been black and white and gray. I stared at it for a full minute, seeking comfort from those dear faces. But they were gone now. They couldn't help me. I turned away and picked up Sophie, my cat. She was also unchanged. Black, with one white paw, she looked the same as always. I settled into my favorite—once rose, now gray—wing chair, with Sophie on my lap, and stroked her. She purred loudly. Maybe I was just tired. I had been up late the night before watching the old-movie channel—an addiction of mine. There had been a double bill: *The Lady Vanishes* and *The 39 Steps,* two of my favorites. I closed my eyes.

I must have dozed off, because when I opened my eyes, the room had darkened and Sophie had vanished. I heard her mewing in the kitchen. I picked up my grocery bag, hoping the fish hadn't spoiled, and made my way to the back of the house—flicking on every lamp and light switch within my reach as I passed. But the illumination was disappointing. Dimmer than usual, as if someone had replaced all the 60-watt bulbs with 25-watt bulbs.

My kitchen, a cheery yellow when I'd left this afternoon, was the color of dirty cement. I poured some cat nibbles into Sophie's formerly blue, now gray, bowl. Undeterred by their new pallor, she gobbled the nibbles down with her usual gusto. Had I read that animals are color-blind?

The telephone on the counter rang. I answered it. A telemarketer. It was getting to be that time of day. Dinnertime. As I hung up, I wondered at my stupidity. Why don't you call a friend? Ask

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them what's happened? Before I did that, I turned on the little TV I kept in the kitchen to see if the five o'clock news had anything about this disaster. The anchor was reporting as usual about Iraq and the White House, a recent earthquake in the Far East, and a new snowstorm from the northwest. Nothing about a gray-out in Philadelphia. The only new thing about the news was that it wasn't in Technicolor. It reminded me of when I was a child and all TV was black-and-white. In fact, this whole experience made me feel as if I was inside one of those old black-and-white noir movies that I used to love. *Notorious, The Maltese Falcon, Rebecca.* I doubted if I would ever watch one again. A musical comedy, in vivid Technicolor—that was what I craved! Now I knew how Dorothy must have felt in *The Wizard of Oz* when she returned to Kansas after her visit to the Emerald City. Only she, unlike me, had been happy to leave the colorful world behind.

I reached for the phone again and dialed Emily. She was my oldest and dearest friend. We had met in kindergarten. She was the only one I could ask about this weird situation who wouldn't think I was crazy. The phone rang half a dozen times before Emily's perky voice said, "Hello, everyone! I've taken off for the Bahamas for a few days. Leave your name and number and I'll call you as soon as I get back."

"Shoot." I'd forgotten she'd left yesterday for her annual winter trip to the islands. As I replaced the receiver, I shivered. The thought of Emily sitting on a beach lined with colorful umbrellas, soaking up the sun, made me feel cold—and depressed. I could call someone else, but . . . This was ridiculous. It had to be my eyes. Otherwise everyone would be in a panic. Reporters would be screaming that the world had gone gray. Some would be blaming the terrorists—others would be blaming the President. But it was too late to see an eye doctor tonight. It took weeks to get an appointment, unless it was an emergency. I could call Angie, my neighbor. But she was such a busybody. As soon as I hung up she'd be calling everyone in the neighborhood, spreading the word that I was going blind—or getting senile.

I tried to read. At least the newspaper looked the same. Black type on white paper. But there wasn't a thing in it about the incredible catastrophe. Of course this issue had come out this morning.

I paced the living-room floor. Sophie watched me disapprovingly from the sofa. I was usually a calm person. I should really eat something. But I had no appetite. And that stuff I'd bought at the supermarket had no appeal for me. Maybe I should go to bed. The sooner I fell asleep, the sooner it would be morning and I could call the doctor and describe my symptoms. Maybe if I really laid it on, he would even see me. Resigned that I could do nothing about

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my situation that night, I trudged upstairs. The bathroom was reassuring, at least. I lived in an old house and the bathroom was all white—white tile, white porcelain, and white plaster. The toothpaste and soap were white, too. All completely normal. The only off note was my toothbrush. Usually lavender, it was now—surprise, surprise—a dull gray.

In the middle of brushing my teeth, I stopped. What had that grocery clerk said? That my toenails were as "black as the ace of spades." It couldn't be my eyes, if my nails looked black to him, too. Unless he was pulling my leg. Having fun at the expense of an old woman.

I left the bathroom and went down the hall to my bedroom. When I stepped in, I was struck by how much it resembled the bedroom in the film *Laura.* I half expected Gene Tierney to step out of the closet in one of her satin and lace negligees. Or Bogart, as Sam Spade, to sit on the edge of the bed, putting together one of his hand-rolled cigarettes. Or Cary Grant to rush in and rescue me from Claude Rains. I wouldn't mind Cary Grant showing up, but as I crawled between my gray sheets (they had been lilac this morning) and turned out the light, the room became peopled with less charming characters: Claude Rains's scary mother; Mr. Gutman, a.k.a. The Fat Man; and that creepy housekeeper, Mrs. Danvers. I was becoming like the heroine in *Rebecca,* played to perfection by Joan Fontaine. She was afraid of everything, expecting a bogeyman under every bed and a ghost around every corner.

Get hold of yourself, I said aloud. There had to be a reasonable explanation for this. Some of these eye conditions could come on suddenly and disappear just as suddenly. Maybe in the morning, when I was rested, everything would be back to normal. With that comforting thought I turned out the light and snuggled under the covers. At least in the dark, everything was the same as the night before.

I must have fallen asleep. When I woke up, the clock said one-thirty. I stretched my legs, hunting for Sophie with my toes. She wasn't there. She always slept at the end of my bed. I switched on the light and the gray room burst upon me, more startling than if it had become neon pink or orange. I reached for my robe, slid into my slippers, and went to look for her.

"Sophie?" I called from the top of the stairs. Usually, when she heard my voice, she came swiftly, padding up the stairs, and wrapped herself around my legs. The stairs remained empty. I started down. On the third step, I heard something. Not a noise, exactly, but a definite sound. A sort of soft shuffling. Cautiously, I descended three more steps. That sound again. I stood, rooted to the step—afraid to go up or down.

Crash!

I jumped. There was nothing soft about that! It was a relief to

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hear a real noise. Sophie must be into something. The noise had come from the kitchen. She must have knocked over a pot or pan. I hurried down the rest of the stairs. As before, I flicked on the lights as I passed through each room. And, as before, the illumination was weak due to my eye condition—or whatever it was.

"Sophie?" I stepped into the kitchen and switched on the light. A pot lay upside down on the floor near the stove. But no cat brushed my bare ankles. Instead, I felt a cold draft. The back door was ajar. I was sure I had locked it before I went to bed. Oh dear, maybe the cat had gotten out. Or maybe someone else . . . had gotten in. I stood riveted, wondering if I should call 911.

I lifted the receiver. Hands grabbed me around the throat and began to squeeze. The phone slipped from my hand. I struggled, gasping, clawing at the hands. Their pressure increased. I felt dizzy. I stared at the blank, gray kitchen wall (which had been yellow that morning). As I stared, two words slowly emerged in the center—in dark type—just as they had at the close of all those noir movies long ago—except for one thing: This time the words were backwards, and—who were all those strangers on the other side, staring up at me . . . ?

The End

Solution to the Mystery Crossword

F	O	R	M	A	■	F	A	C	T	■	A	D	A	M
A	N	E	A	R	■	R	I	R	E	■	L	A	K	E
R	E	A	L	M	■	A	L	A	N	■	A	L	I	T
■	A	R	T	I	S	T	S	I	N	C	R	I	M	E
■	■	■	S	E	I	■	■	S	I	R	■	■	■	■
U	C	A	■	S	N	A	P	■	S	O	U	N	D	S
N	A	D	A	■	A	N	I	L	■	S	N	A	R	E
C	R	I	M	E	I	N	Q	U	E	S	T	I	O	N
L	E	R	O	Y	■	S	U	N	S	■	O	V	I	D
E	D	E	N	I	C	■	E	A	T	S	■	E	T	S
■	■	■	■	N	O	T	■	■	E	T	A	■	■	■
D	E	S	I	G	N	E	R	C	R	I	M	E	S	■
E	D	I	T	■	N	A	I	L	■	L	O	C	A	L
A	I	N	E	■	E	S	T	A	■	E	R	O	S	E
D	E	E	R	■	D	E	A	N	■	S	E	L	E	S

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Art by Mark Evans

NOT FOR LOVE NOR MONEY

by Robin Wilson

Professors divide themselves into sects, and you can tell one faith from another by the cars they drive. Faculties in Business Administration and Engineering drive big American cars, mostly SUVs. They vote Republican. Those of us in the Liberal Arts and Sciences favor unassuming Fords, Hondas, or Chevys, if we haven't made tenure, or the least expensive Volvo, Mercedes, or an occasional BMW, if we have. We vote Democrat. And people in the fine and performing arts wheel around in battered VW campers or tiny Japanese vehicles that look like they ought to have a winding key sticking up out of their tops. And they vote for odd parties you've never heard of. There are exceptions, of course, but they only prove my case.

So I was surprised one warm autumn day after lunch in downtown Greenfield, as I was walking back to campus with my blue blazer slung over my shoulder, to be honked out of my reverie by a huge black Lincoln Navigator that swooshed to the curb next to me and revealed its driver to be the ethereal Naomi Cordier, Associate Professor of Dance, clad, as usual, in something diaphanous and

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floral. In her mid thirties, small, short dark hair, ravishingly beautiful, Naomi had enjoyed a good—for a dancer—ten-year run with major companies, until a foot injury had forced her retirement. She had picked up an MFA in Dance that would allow her to teach, and when she came to Greenfield State three or four years ago, every straight man on campus fell instantly in love. But Naomi in the Navigator? Think Audrey Hepburn suited up to play linebacker for the 49ers.

She leaned across to call out through the passenger-side window: "Dr. Haas! Peter! Have you got a minute? I was just on my way to campus to try to see you. I—uh—we've got a problem."

Carmel California's Robin Wilson has had several dozen science fiction short stories and novelettes published over the years, and in 1995 St. Martin's Press brought out his mystery novel *Death by Degrees*. The author is a former employee of the CIA, and says that he also knows the world of higher education "truly well." His setting for this story is the world of academe, a California college where it appears that one professor has it out for another. ¶

And of course "problem" is the magic word for me. Like *Shazam!* or the click of Dorothy's slippers, that word is transforming, in my case from a middle-aged English professor with the bland looks of a Dutch cheese salesman into the university president's executive assistant charged with discreetly resolving all puzzles, conundrums, screwups, and dastardly acts likely to bring embarrassment to our campus.

"Sure, Naomi," I said, climbing into the Navigator. "Where'd you get this juggernaut?"

"It's Harrison's," she said, pulling back into Main Street traffic. "Harrison Buckman. You know, in Electrical Engineering?"

"Yes, we've done some rock climbing together."

Harrison was much admired as "The King of Grants," and he deserved it. His crew of a dozen scientists and technicians in our Nanotechnology Lab had brought Greenfield State University a modicum of fame.

"Harrison and I, we . . ." She glanced appraisingly at me and then returned her eyes to the crowded road ahead. "We've been living together. . . ." Her voice died and she drove on in silence as if weighing choices. Then, with a determined shake of her head: "Harrison has been hurt. He'll be all right. The doctor says there's been no permanent damage, but someone beat him up pretty badly."

"Beat him up! Who?"

"That's the problem. Harrison says he doesn't know who did it. He was out as usual walking his dog on the hiking trail behind

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our—his house last evening, just after dark, when it happened."

"Did you call the police?"

"I wanted to, but Harrison said no, I don't know why."

"And you want me to do . . . what?"

"Will you come out to the house and talk to Harrison? He's in too much pain to drive to campus."

"Does he want to talk with me?"

Her voice subdued, telling tales out of school, Naomi said, "He doesn't know I've come to see you."

She wheeled the Navigator in at the campus parking-lot entrance, stopped, and turned to me, her eyes moist. "Please, Peter, we need help. Something's wrong and I'm worried."

I dropped down from the Navigator with a promise of action, retrieved my Volvo from the lot, and cell-phoned my office to tell them I would be late returning from lunch. I followed Naomi then back up Main and across town to Mariposa Estates, a development of modest one-story mission-style homes where many faculty lived. Naomi pulled up a driveway and into a garage, its door sliding down behind the Navigator. I parked at the curb and she met me at the door, elfin, beautiful, worried. "He's out on the patio," she said, leading me through a book-lined living room and out a pair of French doors onto a shaded pad of tile, into air scented with jasmine. A redwood recliner bore Harrison Buckman, a wiry, athletic man in his mid forties suddenly fattened by swaths of gauze and tape across his chest, over one shoulder, and around his right arm and hand. He turned his head towards us in obvious pain. His face was red and bruised, one eye nearly swollen shut. "What the hell, Naomi!" he muttered. He sighed and struggled up to a seated position and shook my hand with his left hand. "Hey, Peter. Sorry to bother you with this."

"Wow, Harrison," I said. "How fast was it going when it hit you?"

"Yeah," he said. "Naomi tell you what happened?"

"She says you don't know who did it. Were you robbed? Don't you think you ought to make a police report?"

Instead of answering, Buckman glanced over my shoulder at Naomi and said, "Hey, Naomi, I'm dying of thirst. Could you get me and Peter something? A beer, maybe? You, Peter?"

"Maybe a Coke."

Naomi disappeared and Buckman leaned toward me. "Sit down, Peter," he whispered. "I wasn't robbed. And I don't want to upset Naomi, but I think the guy who did this to me was Joe Hayden."

"In Fine Arts? The painter who used to play NFL football?"

"Yes. Played defensive end a couple of seasons for the Raiders back in the 'eighties, before he got hurt. I guess he discovered painting in therapy, began to sell well up in Bay Area galleries, and got picked up by the GSU Art Department."

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"Can you identify him to the cops?"

Harrison shook his head gingerly, eyes closed. "No. I really didn't see who it was. Just a dark shadow out of the corner of my eye and *whap!* Dropped a bag over my head filled with something. Ether, maybe? Whatever it was, I tried to pull the bag off, took one breath, and I was out for fifteen, twenty minutes. Came to all beat to hell, with Lolly—that's my dog—licking my arm." He shifted on the recliner to find a more comfortable position. "Bruised some ribs and damn near broke my right arm, and my right hand looks like he stamped on it. Broke two fingers."

"So what makes you think it's Hayden?"

"Hayden is Naomi's ex. They got married about a year after she came here, but it didn't work out and she left him."

"And you think that's why he popped you? Because you and Naomi . . . ?"

"It's a good bet. She says he's never really gotten over their divorce. Still telephones once in a while and sends her cards on anniversaries. I don't think she's afraid of him, but he worries her. She says he's gentle, a lot more artist than footballer, but maybe a little nuts."

"All the more reason to call the cops," I said.

"No way, Peter. I've got to handle this my own way. First of all, if Naomi knew Joe did this, she'd be really upset. And if word got out about it, can you imagine the stories in the Greenfield *Gazette?* Hell, in the *San Francisco Chronicle?* 'GSU Professor Beaten in Love Triangle.' That's all it would take to shut off the National Science Foundation and every other granting agency. I might just as well kiss the Nanotech Lab goodbye. I mean, you don't have to be a saint to do good science, but the big foundations like Hewlett and Keck and Carnegie, they won't let you play in their sandbox if your reputation's smudged with any kind of sex thing."

I nodded. "I can see that. But why would he do something like this? Was he trying to get rid of you permanently?"

"No. I don't think so. He could have done it easily enough with me completely out like that."

I was puzzled. "I don't know Hayden very well. We talked once at one of those faculty teas the Swensons throw; you know, where the only 't' consumed is preceeded by 'mar' and followed by 'ni.' How sure are you he's the guy?"

"Well, the bag he used. It's over there by the railing. Take a look."

I crossed the patio and spotted the bag, crumpled brown canvas, the kind of sack you might carry fifty pounds of potatoes in. Or four or five footballs. It still gave off a faint medicinal smell. On one side was a stencil in white of a pirate wearing an eye patch, the logo of the Oakland Raiders.

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"See?" said Buckman. "And what his motive was, I'm not sure, but he went to a lot of trouble to disable my right arm and hand. I'm not one of those theoretical guys who do all their research with a blackboard and a computer. I'm hands-on, and in nanotechnology, a good hand is pretty important. I mean, you're manipulating stuff under the scope that's only a few atoms wide. Maybe he thought he could put me out of business." Buckman paused, squirming to relieve some pain. "Anyway, I don't give a damn why he did it, but first chance I get, I'm going to lay for him with a baseball bat. See how he likes to paint with his arm in a sling."

I drank my Coke, made nice, and drove back to campus and walked across the Quad, aswarm with the three-o'clock class change, to the Admin Building and the president's office. H. Evinrude Swenson had an anteroom full of people waiting for an audience, but Mrs. Abrams, his secretary and sweetly smiling guard dog, squeezed me in.

Swenson's small inner sanctum was utilitarian, without the usual collections of plaques, awards, and certificates you find in the offices of important people, mostly because Ev didn't consider himself very important. "I'm just a kind of greenhouse," he told me when I first went to work for him. "Try to let the sun in and keep the cold out so all the exotic plants around here can grow and flower." And there was only a little irony in his voice.

This time, he greeted me in his Minnesota singsong. "What tale of horror do you have for me today, Peter?"

"You know Naomi Cordier? In Dance?"

"Ah. You bet." His voice bore the soft reverence we all reserve for things that are the best in their class.

And so I told him of Naomi and Buckman and Hayden and what had happened the night before.

Ev leaned back in his old wooden desk chair, his craggy Swedish face creased in thought. "Buckman's right to be worried about reputation," he said. "It's not that granting agencies and foundations are prudish, but any kind of sex-based crime is going to scatter them like a covey of quail on the Fourth of July."

"So what do we do? I'm afraid Buckman's going to try to settle things with Hayden, and that's going to be more trouble."

"Talk to Hayden. See if you can confirm he's the bad guy. If he is, maybe we can come up with something to cool him down, cool both of them down.

"And Peter," he added as I started to leave. "Give this one your best shot. First priority is, make sure the people involved come out all right. Second is preserving that Nanotech Lab. It's a major university asset, and while Buckman's got a deputy, he can't replace his boss as either a grantsman or a scientist."

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I found Joe Hayden in his studio, a large, high room with a slanted ceiling made up of north-facing skylights, the result of a modest remodel of an old warehouse on land taken over by the expanding university. Like all painters' ateliers on campuses, Hayden's was cluttered with student works in progress and daubed, wall to wall, floor to skylight, with splatters, smears, and star-bursts of color, the result of generations of student painters and their collective carelessness and exuberance. Hayden himself was large and muscular, neck as wide as his head, and exceedingly neat. Not a drop of paint on his jeans or white T-shirt. His unsmeared palette hooked over his left thumb, he stood before a large canvas on an easel and poked gently at it with a tiny brush. I know little about painting, but I could see that the image before him was a stark, nonrepresentational flare of colors and he was picking at it with the precision of a pointillist.

He looked up, smiled, and slipped his brush into a cup on the easel. "Hey, Haas. Come to join my four-o'clock techniques class?"

I glanced at my watch. "We've got twenty minutes or so, can we talk a little?"

He read my face. "Something wrong?"

"Yeah. You and Harrison Buckman and Naomi Cordier."

His face darkened. "You're into private territory there, Dr. Haas. I don't see that my relationship with my ex-wife is any business of the university administration."

I nodded. "Of course, Joe." Academics address each other variously by title, last name, or given name, more as indications of warmth—or lack of it—than recognition of rank. "We have no desire to pry into Naomi's business or yours, but last night someone beat the crap out of Buckman."

"No!" Hayden seemed genuinely surprised. "And you think it was me? Because Naomi and I were married once?"

I cocked an eyebrow and said nothing.

Hayden closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath as if to prepare himself for something. Then he sighed audibly and gave me a look of piercing honesty that was beyond pretense. "Look, Peter," he said, "whatever Naomi and I had is long gone. She's the best thing ever happened to me, but we just didn't, you know, mesh. I loved her dearly and I still worry about her and want the very best for her, but we aren't ever going to be partners, and if she's got something good going with Buckman, I'm all for it. He seems like an okay guy, and if he can make her happy, well . . ." He ran out of gas and paused. "I guess I can see how someone might think it was me, but my God, I haven't slugged anybody since the Rams game in 'eighty-five."

"And last night?" I asked.

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"You mean, do I have an alibi? You bet I do. Right there." He pointed to a video camera mounted high on a wall bracket looking down at the painting on his easel. "I sleep in mornings, teach most afternoons, and do my own work evenings. I was working on this," he said, pointing to the easel, "from just after supper until maybe midnight, and I do a time-lapse tape so I can show students how a painting is layered—you know, deeper pigments above brighter."

"And you're on the tape? With date and times?"

"Better be, or I'm gonna raise hell with Audio-Visual." He scratched his chin. "I suppose someone could phony up the times on the tapes, but not me. I wouldn't have any idea how to do it."

I nodded. I didn't think he would have any idea how to do it, either. "Thanks for telling me this, Joe. I think I can put this whole thing to rest now."

"Yeah, well, apart from getting busted for something I sure as hell didn't do, I really wouldn't want Naomi to think I'd do such a thing."

As I turned for the outside door, two chatting students ambled in through the hallway entrance. I lowered my voice. "One last thing. Do you have a brown canvas bag with the Raiders logo on it?"

"A ball bag? Sure. Used to use 'em like duffel bags when we were on the road. Got half a dozen of them one place or another. There's one over there in the corner. I stick my folding easel and stuff in when we go out on campus to do landscape exercises." He grinned a little self-consciously. "Kind of my trademark on campus, I guess. The beast who opted for beauty." He walked past the entering students to a portable coatrack mostly hidden by the opened door, peered behind the door, looked back across the room at me with raised eyebrows, and shrugged. "Somebody must've borrowed it. Does it matter?"

I smiled and shook my head and left.

As I walked across campus through crowds of chattering students to the faculty parking lot, I found myself convinced of Joe Hayden's innocence. After some years in my job, I have what I think is a finely-tuned crap filter, and I found it hard to believe that one man could be an NFL pro, a skilled painter, an effective teacher, and a consummate actor. And if Hayden wasn't the attacker, Buckman had nothing to worry about so far as his reputation and its impact on his grant-getting. He and Naomi needed to know that right away, certainly before he felt well enough to begin stalking Hayden with his baseball bat.

In half an hour I was back with Harrison and Naomi on the Buckman patio, this time with an Anchor Steam in my hand. "I

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don't think you have to worry about granting agencies and the NSF," I said.

Harrison cocked his eyes toward Naomi and tried to hush me with a nearly imperceptible head shake. "It's okay," I said. "Naomi needs to know what's worrying you."

Naomi said, "What? What haven't you told me, Harrison?"

Despite a glowering look from Harrison, I told her of our earlier suspicions about Joe Hayden, emphasizing "our" and "we" in every sentence to give Harrison a bit of cover. "But now I don't think he had anything to do with the attack."

"Of course not," Naomi said. "My God, Joe's about as fierce as old Lolly over there." She nodded her head toward the hairy bundle panting in a patio corner.

"Then who . . . ?" Harrison's face displayed a twisted mixture of relief and renewed puzzlement.

"Let's think about it," I said. "Since you weren't robbed and I don't think the attack had anything to do with you and Naomi being an item, what's left?"

Naomi said, "Not for love nor money . . ."

"Right," I said. "Who would gain from damaging your arm, Harrison? Or from damaging your reputation, if the love triangle nonsense got out?"

Naomi and Harrison exchanged a glance.

"What?" I said.

"Harrison's deputy at the lab," said Naomi. "He would gain from both."

Harrison said, "I can't believe it was Charlie Bowen."

"Who would take over," I asked, "if you had to leave the lab?"

"Well . . . I guess it would be Charlie. At least for a while."

"Tell me about him."

"There's not much to tell. Ph.D. at Cal Tech in 'ninety-seven, hired on here after a one-year postdoc at Livermore, came to work for me in the lab four years ago, took over as deputy last year."

"And?"

Harrison waggled his left hand. "He's so-so, I guess. Ambitious but not too good at grant preparation. He's good at administrative detail and I like the way he keeps the lab humming along on schedule. In his own projects, he's not very innovative and he's maybe too careful. Sometimes you have to take chances in science, bet on possibilities. Bowen's not a risk taker. But he can cook up a pretty productive research protocol. You know, take a hypothesis and look for ways to establish proof for it."

"Like coming up with evidence," I said, "to support the notion that Joe Hayden assaulted Harrison Buckman?"

Harrison's eyes widened. "You mean he could have staged the whole thing?"

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"If the attack on you wasn't for love or money," I said, "what's left? How about power? Advancement? Climbing up the academic food chain?"

I could see Harrison's mind working, testing one theory, rejecting another. "Well, I suppose . . ."

"Think about it, Harrison. You say Bowen's not much of a scientist, but good at keeping the organization going. Think he might have ambitions to replace you?"

Harrison slowly nodded, conviction building in him. "Boy, if it is him, I'm going to pound that little twit into nanobits."

"Yeah," I said. "And then you've got another reputation issue on your hands. What will the NSF think about the headline 'Lab Chief Batters Deputy'?"

Harrison breathed deeply, forcing calm. "Okay. But what else can I do? If we give this mess to the cops, they might not find any evidence that would convict him, if it is Charlie, and just making the effort would get us plenty of bad publicity."

I pondered. Then I said, "Let's theorize. Assume you're convinced that Bowen bagged you, what would you do? I mean within legal bounds. More important, assume he knows you know, what would he expect you to do?"

"I'd make his life so damn miserable he'd be sending out resumes by the bushel. No money for his own projects. Rotten teaching schedule . . ." Harrison's face took on a wicked smile, distorted by his swollen cheeks. "And he'll be up for tenure next year. . . . Ha!"

"He wouldn't have any doubt about what was in store?"

"He's not stupid."

I thought some more, and then it was time to act. "Harrison? You have a computer in the house somewhere, with a printer? Some lab stationery?

"Of course."

"How about you—no—how about *you,* Naomi, can you type up a letter?"

Naomi was already on her feet, voile twirling. "I can do a few things other than dance."

"It should read, 'Professor Buckman. I herewith resign my position with the laboratory and my assistant professorship at Greenfield State University, effective immediately.' On the copy lines put the chair of the Electrical Engineering Department and President Swenson, make three copies, and address three envelopes accordingly. Drop the whole bundle into a manila envelope big enough to hold a videotape."

Naomi, smiling now at the prospect of action, darted inside.

Harrison said, "Why would he sign?"

"I'll show you," I said, "as soon as we get back to campus."

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We had stopped for something to eat and it was almost seven by the time the three of us crossed the deserted evening Quad, Naomi in something mauve and gauzy that swirled when she walked, and Harrison, limping, in a denim jacket draped over his shoulders. We entered Hayden's studio, where he was just starting to resume his evening's painting.

He was surprised, confused, apprehensive. "Look," he said, his eyes darting from one to another of us. "I told you everything I could this afternoon, Haas." Harrison did his best to remain expressionless and Naomi looked at Joe as if she might weep.

"It's okay, Joe," I said. "I think we can fix this whole thing pretty fast with a little help from you. Is that tape you made last night still in the camera?"

He held up a remote. "Yeah. I'm just about to start it again, continue what I've been doing."

"Would it be a terrible loss if you gave us the tape?"

Hayden shrugged. "I can live without it. Worth it if it gets me off the hook."

"Oh, Joe," said Naomi. "You were never on the hook."

This brought a smile to his face. "You want the tape, I'll give it to you."

"Before you unload it," I said, "will you join Harrison and Naomi at your easel?"

"What in God's name are you up to, Peter?" said Harrison. Hayden looked confused. Naomi cocked her head for an instant and smiled as realization of my plan dawned on her. She held up the manila envelope with the letters. "Come, gentlemen. Pretend we just won the lottery, the three of us, and we're congratulating each other with lots of smiles."

Naomi posed Harrison on one side of Hayden, his left hand in Hayden's right, and she stood on the other side, her hand on Hayden's arm. I pressed the Record button on the remote. The camera clicked on and blinked its red eye. "We'll give it sixty seconds," I said. "Make sure whoever looks at the tape that proves where Joe was last night will also see where he is this evening. And who he's talking with."

After the minute, I thumbed the remote and Joe retrieved the tape and handed it to me. I dropped it into the envelope with the letters of resignation. "You going to mail that to him?" asked Harrison, now reading from the same page as Naomi and I and smiling as broadly as his injured face would allow.

"No," I said. "If we're wrong about this, I think he'll let me know quick enough. If we're right, he won't have the guts to try to fake me out. So I think I'll just drop it off at his home. Maybe me being the bearer will give credibility to the bad tidings."

"Ah, Peter," Naomi said. "You're not credible. You're *in*credible." ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

VISIT TO A CHAT ROOM

by Timothy F. Dempsey

Fred was about to hit the snooze alarm for the third time when he realized he had better get out of bed. It took each member of the family a little longer on Mondays, and each of them relied on him to get things started. If he slept too late, the morning became a panic and everyone blamed him. He'd rather drag his head off the pillow now than have to listen to all the chatter that would come his way if he delayed. He swung his legs off his side of the bed, slipped on his boxers, and stumbled down the hallway. He stuck his head in his son's room. "David, time to get up." David mumbled, but Fred knew his words were not registering. He walked in and shook his fifteen-year-old's shoulder. "David, it's seven-oh-seven; I'll be back in ten minutes to make sure you're up. You need to print out your paper, remember?"

"Dad, go away."

"You asked me to remind you!"

"Remind me in ten minutes."

Fred backed out of the room and proceeded down the hallway. He knocked on his daughter's door. No response. He knocked louder. "Pumpkin, time to get up." Still no reply. He cracked open the door and peeked in, knowing how much Connie hated it if he looked in on her while she was dressing. All he saw was a big lump under the heavy quilt. As he shook the lump, he looked beyond it to the empty bed on the other side of the room, so nicely made and covered with a collection of colorful stuffed animals, most of them acquired, one at a time, on his business trips. As

"In the Internet age," says Timothy Dempsey, "just a moment's weakness can lead to grave consequences. There are probably millions of good family men [like the one in this story] who could suddenly appear to be less than they are." Mr. Dempsey lives in North Carolina. He has been published in several professional journals, but this is his first fiction. He is currently finishing up his first novel.

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usual, he had a twinge, just a moment, of missing his other daughter, wondering what routine she used to get out of bed in the dorm. "Come on, Connie, time to roll. I'll be back in ten minutes."

He retreated to his bedroom, noticed that his wife, Sheila, was still sleeping, and quietly slipped into their bathroom, closing the door behind him. He ran the shower to get the hot water up while he brushed his teeth. He just needed a quick rinse, having showered and shaved the night before. He dried himself hurriedly, slipped into a pair of sweatpants, and threw on a T-shirt, preparing himself for round two.

Back to David's room. "Seven twenty-one, Son; boat sails in thirty-nine minutes."

"All right, all right, I'm up." That was easy. Knock on Connie's door. No reply. Crack the door again. The lump had not budged; there were no indications that it harbored any signs of life. He leaned over and shook it. "Connie, thirty-eight minutes to liftoff." Nothing, not a stir. He dug at the quilt trying to locate her head, pulled the quilt back and saw the mass of unkempt, tangled, and knotted blond hair. Her face must be in there somewhere. He brushed the hair back till he found it, smiled at how peaceful she looked, then all but yelled, "C'mon, Connie, it's time to get up. Let's go." She half opened her eyes, barely uncovering her baby blues behind the narrow slits.

"Uumpf," she said, but that was enough for Fred.

He bounded down the stairs, let the dog out into the fenced-in backyard, and walked up the front driveway to retrieve his *Newsday*. Back inside, he checked to assure that all the bodies were stirring. David was in the shower and Connie was pounding on the door telling him to hurry up. Good. Everything was normal. He put the coffee on, grabbed some cereal, a bowl, and some milk, and sat at the breakfast table to look at the paper. Starting at the back, he checked the football scores first and scanned some of the articles, happy that the Jets had won the Sunday-night game, during which he had fallen asleep. He flipped the paper to the front, just as David and Connie entered the kitchen. He glanced up at the digital clock on the microwave and said, "Nine minutes to liftoff."

Both kids groaned at the same time. Connie said, "Dad, don't you ever get tired of annoying us?"

He laughed, grabbed his "World's Greatest Dad" mug of coffee, and headed up the stairs, dropping a quick and curt "Morning" to Sheila as he passed her on the stairs. Out of the sweats and T-shirt and into a golf shirt and khakis in no more than a minute. God, he loved casual dress. Since they'd stopped insisting on suits in the office, a good ten minutes of his time had been freed up every morning. He looked in the mirror and ran his hand through his thinning hair, bounded down the stairs, poured the rest of his coffee into an Amazon.com travel cup, and added some hot coffee from the pot to top it off. "C'mon, kids, let's go, time to move out.

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It's eight-oh-two; we're two minutes late; let's get the lead out."

Sheila was standing by the coffee machine. She had turned the TV on and she was watching the *Today* show. He leaned down to kiss her goodbye and he could see that she was upset. "What's wrong?" he said.

"It's happened again."

"What's happened again, Hon?"

"A fourteen-year-old girl. Kidnapped right out of her own bedroom." She looked up with tears in her eyes, then glanced across the room at her thirteen-year-old daughter. "Fred, she lives out on the Island, on the North Fork, just an hour or so from here. Oh God, Fred, this is so frightening. I don't care what you say, I want a house alarm. I don't care what it costs. I'm calling today. I'm going to have one installed as soon as possible."

"Okay," he said. "Whatever you want. But we gotta go."

After dropping the kids at school, Fred parked at the train station, ran up the stairs to the platform just as the 8:22 was pulling in. Boy, that was close, he thought, knowing this was the last train that could get him into the office by nine-thirty, about as late as he could be without suffering the stares. Happy to get a window seat, he booted up his laptop and went over his charts, assured himself that the numbers were right, and prepared his remarks. He would have to tell his manager that he'd missed last month's quota, but just by a few thousand dollars. He would more than make it up this month.

After the ten-o'clock staff meeting, during which he took his punishment in stride, he spent the day on the phone, calling customers, checking with suppliers, and bantering with his secretary. He lunched at his desk and worked straight through until six. He left the office disappointed that he had not gotten a new order, had not started the month off with a bang.

"Screw it," he said out loud as he entered Penn Station. Rather than run for the 6:30, he stopped for a quick beer and then settled into a corner seat on the 6:56. He looked through the evening *Post,* read about the kidnapping. The girl had gone to bed around ten. Her parents were sure her light was out and she was in bed sleeping when they went to bed after the eleven o'clock news. When they went to wake her in the morning, her bed was empty. There was no real sign of a struggle, but her window was open, and there was mud all over her window sill and on her white carpet. Outside her window, the flowerbed had been trampled. He closed the paper, closed his eyes, and nodded off for about ten minutes, waking magically just as the conductor called out the Huntington Station.

As he was driving to pick up David from lacrosse practice, his cell phone rang. He looked at the caller ID and saw it was home. Sheila must need milk, he thought, knowing he was risking a

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ticket as he answered it, saying, "Shea Stadium." He laughed out loud as Sheila sighed disgustedly. He was the only one who thought his tired and worn-out joke was still funny.

"Fred, where are you?"

"I'm on 110, Hon, don't worry. I didn't forget about David; I'm almost to the field."

"David's home. I went and picked him up early. Fred, you have to get home right away. Hurry, please!" There was a sense of urgency in her voice that alarmed him and then the line went dead. He did a quick, illegal U-turn and sped home, going through red lights and stop signs as if they weren't there. In the six minutes it took him to reach his block, his heart had started racing and he was sweating and anxious, afraid that something terrible had happened. As he turned the corner, he saw a late-model black sedan parked in his driveway. He picked up his cell phone and dialed 911 as he cautiously walked up the path to the front door.

"What is the nature of your emergency, please?"

"I don't know," he said, "something is wrong at my house. Just hold the line for a second; I'm going in."

"Sir, maybe you shouldn't go in. . . . Do you want police or fire assistance?"

"I don't know," he yelled, "just hold on for one second while I find out!" He opened the door and saw two men in dark suits standing in his kitchen. One of them was gray-haired and balding, early fifties, close to Fred's age. The other was much younger, around thirty or so. He wore dark sunglasses that were unable to disguise the anger in his face. Seated at the table were his wife and his two children, all of whom looked absolutely terrified. Connie had clearly been crying. He spoke into the phone, "Police. Seventeen Elm, and hurry, please."

The older one walked over, reached out his hand, and showed him a badge. "That won't be necessary, sir; we're with the FBI."

"What's going on?" Fred stammered.

"We'd like you to come with us, sir. We'd like to ask you some questions."

"What about?" He was mystified.

"You might not want to discuss this in front of your family, sir."

"I have nothing to hide from my family. What the hell is this all about, anyway?" He was getting angry and upset now.

"It's about a kidnapping, sir. We'd like to ask you about the kidnapping last night in Greenport."

Sheila broke in, despite the angry look from the agent. "I already told them that we were home all last night, Fred, but they won't listen to me. They won't go away."

"Why don't you just come with us, sir?" The younger one had spoken for the first time, the impatience prominent in his voice. Fred was somehow slightly relieved when he saw the squad car

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pull up, with the Huntington police, who got out carefully, hands on their holsters, ready for action. As they walked up the driveway, the older agent very slowly and carefully opened the side door and held his gold badge up high, telling the police, "We're federal agents, Officers. Everything here is under control." The cops walked in and looked at the badge. One of them walked out and looked at the license plate on the car, then got on his radio. The other one just stood in the kitchen doorway, surveying the scene.

His partner came back after putting the radio down and said to Fred, "They're legitimate, sir. I'm afraid there's not much more we can do." The cops backed out, but sat in their car to watch.

The older agent let out a big sigh, turned to Fred, and said, in a not very friendly voice, "Look, sir, time is precious right now. We are trying to find this girl. Are you coming with us or not?"

"No, not until I find out what the hell you are bothering me about it for. My wife told you we were home all night. I don't think I've been out to the North Fork in twenty years. What *is* this all about?"

"Fine, sir, if you want to do this in front of your family, that's up to you. Do you spend a lot of time on your computer, sir?"

"I spend some. I don't know if it's 'a lot.' "

"Do you ever visit chat rooms, sir?"

"Occasionally." For the first time, Fred's voice quivered ever so slightly.

"Do you use the screen name 'Hotdamndaddy'?"

Fred froze at the mention of the name. His knees buckled a little and he thought he was going to faint. He couldn't speak. He looked at his wife, asking for forgiveness and understanding all in a fast glance. He looked at his daughter, knowing she would have the most trouble with this. She read his eyes and started crying again. "Ohmigod, Daddy, what did you do?"

"I didn't do anything, Pumpkin. It's all a misunderstanding. Let me go with these gentlemen, and I'll get it cleared up."

As they left the house, Fred noticed the television crew just setting up by the curb, the reporter rushing to get her microphone in his face. Instinctively, he put his hands in front of his face, hiding himself, like all the common criminals he'd seen on TV. The reporter stuck the mic out and brusquely asked, "Excuse me, Mr. Miller, do you know anything about the kidnapping of Amanda Leavy?"

He took his hands down for a moment and looked straight at her, not at the camera, as he barely whispered, "No, no, I don't." As the agent put his hands on Fred's head and helped him into the backseat of the sedan, he began to cry, ever so softly, to himself. As they backed out of the driveway, he could see the reporter talking to Sheila on the front steps of his house.

They drove him over to Smithtown, no one talking on the way. As

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they entered the office, one of them, the younger one, asked him if he wanted a drink of water. "Yes. Please," he stammered, hardly audible.

The interrogation started: "Where do you work?" "What do you do?" "Do you love your wife?" "Have you ever been arrested?" The agents were relatively polite, but slowly they inched closer to him. The younger one began to stick his face right in front of Fred's, commanding a hold on his eyes, gripping them like a steel trap. "How often do you look at porn sites?" "Do you own any porn magazines or videotapes?" "Do you like little girls?" The lights and the questioning were beginning to suffocate Fred. He was sweating. He was answering all of their questions truthfully. He hardly ever looked at porn sites; he was normal; he was a good husband and a good father. He hadn't done anything.

They finally honed in on the few facts they had. "Look, we have retrieved everything off her hard disk. There is a record of where she surfed. She had software that captured her chats. The owners of the site are cooperating fully. They have determined that "Hotdamndaddy" is you. Look at this." The young one threw some stapled papers at Fred.

He glanced down and looked at the typed transcript, his eye running quickly through the cryptic lines of sexual innuendo. He could feel himself paling, the blood draining from his face as he reached the final damning passage:

SWEETNESS: have u evr bn with a virgin

HOTDAMNDADDY: I've had my share . . . have you ever been with a daddy?

Shortly after typing that question—or was it an offer?—he had grown uncomfortable. He didn't know why he was there, exchanging sexual suggestions with a stranger. He had quickly logged out of the chat room, discomfited, if a little titillated.

They started in on him again. "So you like little girls? You've had your share of virgins?" Up until this point, the older agent could have been an executive at Fred's company. He had been polite and businesslike. Suddenly, he slammed his hand down on the desk and screamed at Fred, spittle spraying into Fred's face, "WHERE IS SHE? DID YOU KILL HER? OR IS SHE HIDDEN SOMEWHERE? TELL US NOW, AND WE CAN HELP YOU. IF SHE DIES WHILE YOU'RE JERKING US AROUND, WE'LL PUT A NEEDLE IN YOUR ARM FOR SURE!"

He told his story again. "Look, my brother-in-law was over for the holidays. He's single. He's only twenty-six. He must have used my computer to visit some of those sites. He asked me if he could check his e-mail and of course I let him, but I didn't watch him. After that I started to get all these junk e-mails, enticing come-ons: triple X, enhance your size, adult pictures, teenage pictures, all nude . . . all kinds of this crap. I deleted most of them, most of the time, but

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every now and then I clicked on one. I went to a few of the sites, but never for very long and never for very deep. I never paid a penny. I'd only see the tamer stuff that they show for free. But I did see nude pictures. I did see what looked like teenage girls. I felt guilty, thought of my own daughters. Then one day, for some reason, I guess I was bored, I did click on a chat-room button. I slid right into this joking that you see, back and forth, a few times. I don't know how it happened. I can't explain it. It only lasted a few minutes and I caught myself and logged off. I never even looked at that kind of site again after that. I was disgusted with myself. I didn't know who 'Sweetness' was. She could have been an old woman in Sweden for all I knew. Or a fag pretending to be a young girl. I know all those things happen and I felt so foolish. I made a mistake. And I'm sorry. But it's not what you think. I'm not a pervert. I had nothing to do with this poor girl's disappearance."

It went on like this all evening, throughout the night, and into the next morning. He was exhausted, tired, hungry. His spirit was broken. Each telling he'd get harder and harder on himself, feeling worse and worse for his indiscretion, beginning to believe that he was a pervert, that he did do something to hurt this girl. He cried, out loud now, visibly sobbing. He banged his head against the table as he blurted, "What do you want me to confess to, for God's sake?"

Just then, the older agent was called outside, and he stayed outside for a good five minutes. The younger one lit up a cigarette, blew smoke into Fred's face. When his partner came back in, he was a changed man. He looked defeated. He walked over to Fred and said, "You can go home now."

The younger one mumbled, "What the—?"

Fred put his head down and cried in relief, purging himself, draining his emotions into his sleeve. After a minute or so, he looked up. "What happened? Did you find her? Is she all right? Is she dead? Did you find the killer?"

The older one just repeated, "You can go home now."

Fred pulled himself together and went to the bathroom to wash his face. He held his hands over the sink and stared into his own eyes. They were hollow and dark and he could not see himself in them. He was afraid of the depth of the darkness, the emptiness that stared back at him.

He walked towards the front door, but was stopped by the younger agent. "No, there are too many reporters out there. We have a back way." They went down into a cellar, across a long dark alleyway, and emerged almost a block away from where they had entered the night before. Another late-model black sedan was waiting for him, engine running, with a different agent in it, one he had not met before. Again, they drove in silence. As they turned the corner on his block, he saw the throng: multiple satellite dishes, TV

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vans, and at least fifty people hanging around on his front lawn. He asked the agent to pull all the way up into the driveway and he made a run for the back door before they could organize to block him. The door was locked, and he banged on it till Sheila finally came and let him in. The agent left without saying a word.

As he quickly closed the door behind him, locking it before the horde of reporters could muscle in, he reached for his wife and put his arms around her. He began to sob, crying openly, and repeating, "I'm sorry, Hon, I'm so sorry." It took him a long minute before he realized that Sheila was not hugging him back, was not responding with any feeling at all. Her arms hung loosely at her sides, her body almost rigid. He stepped back a little, sliding his arms away, but kept his hands on her shoulders and looked into her face. Obviously, she had had a miserable night as well. She had been crying, her face swollen, her eyes red and puffy, her hair unkempt and damp. She wore no makeup and looked as if she hadn't slept a moment, either.

He didn't know what to say, didn't know what she knew. He took a deep breath and tried again. "Sheila, I'm sorry, but I didn't do anything, you know that, don't you?"

"Please, spare me. No more lies. I can't take it." She turned away from his grasp, walked out of the kitchen, through the living room where the kids were sprawled on the floor with blankets and pillows, past the blaring television. She kept going, up the stairs towards the bedroom, but he stopped in his tracks, his very being pulled as if by a tractor beam into the TV screen, where he saw pictures of the killer: a young, disheveled, hirsute man in a dirty flannel shirt and torn jeans. Fred sat down on the edge of the chair, noticed the CNN logo in the corner, and tried to read all of the text crawling along the bottom of the screen: "Drifter followed victim home from local mall. Suspect chose victim at random. No prior relationship. Victim apparently strangled. No signs of sexual assault. Long Island salesman freed."

His vision had tunneled, he could only see the television, and it took the third or fourth time that David called, "Dad, Dad, snap out of it," before he could acknowledge his son's presence.

"What, David, what?" He was defensive, almost screaming. "What do you want?"

"Whoa, that was scary. . . . Are you okay?"

He lightened up a little. "Yes, son. I'm fine."

"Why did they suspect you? Do you know this girl? Do you know the killer? Did you have ANYTHING to do with this?"

He saw that his son was near tears and that his daughter was just as frightened, hugging her pillow tightly to her chin, attempting to squeeze out the fear. "No, no, of course not. Apparently, I was once in the same on-line chat room as her, that's all. There's nothing more."

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At first relieved, David then seemed puzzled. "What kind of chat room? I didn't know you even knew about chat rooms."

"David, it's not important. The important thing is that I had nothing to do with this. It was all a big misunderstanding. I love you, and I love you, Connie. I am so tired; it has been a terrible ordeal. I have to go see your mother." When he arrived in the bedroom, he saw that she was asleep, curled in the fetal position, fully dressed on top of an unmade bed, hugging her pillow in much the same way that Connie had been hugging hers.

He took a long, hot shower. As the sweat and grime flowed down the drain, he tried to wash away the dirty feelings, but the pounding water was unable to cleanse his spirit. He slipped beyond remorse into emptiness. He felt that his very soul was vacant. He had hurt his family, and the whole world knew it. He had suggested something filthy to somebody's daughter. He felt shame dragging him into an abyss, deeper than any darkness he had ever feared. For just a nanosecond, he imagined slitting his wrists with his straight-edge razor. He pictured his lifeblood flowing into the swirling drain, imagined himself crumpled into a heap on the floor of the shower, and wondered how long it would be before Sheila would find him.

He shook his head as he turned off the faucets, forcing the evil thoughts away. No, he said to himself, you'll get through this. Your family needs you to get though this. He used the razor to shave and then peeked out the window to see that the number of reporters and cameras had been halved. But there were still a few satellite-dish equipped vans, one from the Long Island cable news channel. At least the national networks had bailed, he thought, as he went down to make some coffee, turning off the television as he passed through the living room, stepping over the children, both of whom had finally found some solace in sleep.

He saw that the phone was off the hook, the receiver sitting in the towel drawer, and he took it out and hung it up. It rang instantly. "Fred Miller. This is Eyewitness News. Can you tell us why the FBI arrested you?"

"I wasn't arrested, just questioned."

"Then tell us why they suspected you."

"Uh, not right now. Give us some space, please."

He hung up and the phone rang again immediately. "Is this Fred Miller?"

"Yes."

"Joan Summers, Cable News 12. I'm right in your driveway. Can you come out for an interview, please?"

"No."

"Don't you want to clear your name and tell your side of the story?"

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"No."

He hung up and the phone rang again. He stuck it back in the towel drawer.

Forgetting about coffee, he sat at the kitchen table, held his head up with his hands, and cried uncontrollably, muttering to himself, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." But he was no longer clear for what.

"DADDY! DADDY! LET ME IN!" He awoke with a start, unaware until waking that he had fallen asleep. He lifted his head off the table and felt a twinge of pain in his neck. He looked at the back door and could see his oldest daughter, Susan, peering through the blinds, several reporters sticking their microphones in her face, trying to get their cameras in position to see into the house. As he unlatched the door, he opened it only slightly, creating just enough space to let his daughter in but keep the flock out. Susan hugged him and began to cry. "Oh, Daddy, what's going on?"

"Everything is going to be okay, Sugar; I didn't do anything. It's all a big misunderstanding." He said it as if he were trying to convince himself. "What are you doing here? What about school?"

"I know Mom told me not to. But I couldn't help it. I started driving almost as soon as I hung up with her, after she called to tell me the FBI took you into custody. Oh, Daddy, what was I supposed to do? Go to sleep and then to class? I just couldn't, so I got in the car and started driving. I kept switching stations, trying to get news. I didn't want to call Mom 'cause she'd tell me to go back, but I kept calling my friends to keep me busy. I was so relieved when they said they had arrested someone else, but just for a moment. Then I thought about that poor little girl. Oh, Daddy, did you know her?"

He sighed and looked at his feet, realizing that it was going to come out, no matter how many times he denied it. "Let me put some coffee on." He shared the truth. As the rest of the family awoke and joined the klatsch, one by one, he retold the story, using the same words, the weight of which seemed to double with each admission. "I'm not a pervert. I have never cheated, never even thought about it. I looked at a few dirty Web sites, got embarrassed, and stopped doing it. But the e-mails poured in and every now and then I clicked on one. I don't even know how I got in this chat room or why I became Hotdamndaddy."

Each telling had less conviction, and he started to wonder just who he was. Was he a pervert? How could he adopt such a name? Who was he fooling with his lies about virgins? What did he expect out of such an exchange? Why had it titillated him? What were they going to say at work? Would they fire him? Would Sheila forgive him? Or Connie? How was he supposed to go on with his life?

Meanwhile, he could see it in their eyes, could see that they read his guilt and his shame; they felt his doubt. He could not defend

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himself, didn't even try to defend the truth. How could he defend what he didn't understand? But he did rationalize the unspoken judgments. After all, he was still the same person that he had been the day before, a good father and a good husband. He had so much love in his heart for his family; he would never knowingly hurt any of them.

He pleaded with Sheila. "Go outside with me. We have to get rid of the reporters. They won't leave us alone until I go out and talk to them."

"You got yourself into this; get yourself out of it."

Susan and David went with him, but Connie remained aloof and distant. He stepped out, a child under each arm, and motioned for the reporters to gather and get ready for him to read a statement. He was shaking so badly that he had to hold the sheet of notebook paper with both hands. His voice faltered and cracked as he read: "My heart goes out to the family of Amanda Leavy. Their loss is impossible to fathom, and we should all respect their privacy and allow them space to mourn in peace. I have never met Amanda or any of her family, never spoke to them, never heard of them before last night. The FBI found my name in an Internet chat room that she had visited at the same time as me. Apparently, we had a short exchange. I respect the FBI, and all the police, for vigorously investigating all leads and for tracking down all possible clues. I was relieved, of course, that they were able to arrest her killer so quickly. I regret that a small indiscretion on my part diverted their attention, however briefly. I further regret the pain this incident has caused my family. I have nothing to add, other than to ask that you disassemble your stakeout and allow me and my family to get on with our lives. Thank you."

Fred hugged his children, each in turn, and began to retreat to his front door. He heard some of the individual questions stand out from the cacophony of shouted voices: "What was the nature of your 'indiscretion'?" "What is the name of the chat room where you met Amanda?" "What, *exactly,* were the words that you exchanged?" "Where is your wife?"

He lost his composure momentarily, and turned back in anger. "I told you, no more questions. Just leave me alone."

As he entered the living room, he saw that Sheila had been sitting, watching his performance on television, surrealistically able to look up and see the back of his head through the blinds while the cameras focused on his face as he spoke. Her head remained still, as just her eyes reached up and grabbed his. He could not see even a trace of recognition, not a hint of the love they had shared for so many years. She spoke in a dry monotone, not a single inflection betraying her feelings. "You know, in time, you'll have to answer those questions." ●

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SEATED WOMAN

by Jeffry Scott

It is not a big canvas as they go, about three feet deep by two wide, rather dull and muddy at a distance and the composition seems odd. Most of the bottom third is filled by a tiled floor—plain tiles—uninteresting.

Then comes the chair, a chunky, peasant-made job without curves or decoration, its color only a touch darker than those tiles—unless that's a trick of the eye, difficult to tell somehow—so it appears to be growing out of the floor like fungus. Perhaps the picture needed cleaning or the onlooker was confused.

Here with a story about newspapermen is lifelong newspaperman Jeffry Scott. As many longtime *EQMM* readers will know, "Jeffry Scott" is a pseudonym the author uses for his short fiction—which he's been producing for *EQMM* for more than thirty years. Just like the characters in his new story, Mr. Scott once traveled the globe in pursuit of news. Now he's mostly to be found in England.

I've never seen the thing, you understand. We are dealing in hearsay.

Robin Ratcliffe told me all about it and that is how I can describe this painting in considerable detail. Robin wasn't one for art galleries but he felt seedy one morning-after and needed a washroom in a hurry. Public buildings tend to have them. He was halfway between a bar and a hotel at the time, but the gallery was right across the street so that's where he went.

He wouldn't say at the time what city he was in. I think he feared that morbid curiosity might drive me to try my own luck, if I knew the location. With hindsight I believe that the gallery is in New York, west of Central Park. I could confirm that; I have no intention of doing so.

Brits are strange, self-conscious creatures, especially when abroad. Pit stop completed, Robin decided that it was bad form to treat a shrine of culture so dismissively, as if anyone noticed him enter or would have cared if they had done. The place was cool without being chilly, quiet and calm and restful, persuading him to

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make a token round of the exhibits.

Robin was very much your see-one-Old-Master-and-go-off-home type but he did his best. Works on show were impressively mounted and some forbade viewers to cross red cords fencing a wall-space, but the pictures struck him as no better than passable to mediocre. Bored yet dutiful, he drifted through a couple of rooms and then he found sanctuary as the queasiness struck again.

The gallery wasn't busy at the time, and a side room small enough to be humanly scaled seemed to beckon. It looked cosy, Robin said bitterly. Settling into a corner of a surprisingly comfortable window seat, he closed his eyes to offset a brief spell of dizziness. He definitely did not nod off, Robin Ratcliffe assured me long afterwards. Then he apologised for raising his voice. (I had not suggested that he'd dreamed what happened to him; he was just understandably . . . sensitive about the incident.)

The next bit came out during his second or third version of the story. Originally, Robin skipped the part where he opened his eyes. After a few retellings he understood that I wouldn't laugh at him or, worse still, remain solemn and then speed back to El Vino, the Fleet Street hangout, to announce that Robbo had lost it or, best possible case, turned most peculiar.

Eyes closed, for no logical reason Robin felt uneasy and borderline alarmed. It was an illogical relief to find upon opening his eyes that he still had the side room to himself. He took a deep, reassuring breath. Quietness deeper than a hush had been claustrophobic enough to generate minor panic. He said, inadequately, that it was as if an invisible balloon had inflated to expel all sound and a lot of air from the room.

He was rising from the couch, idly scanning the far wall, because that was the one facing him, when he noticed a darkish mass in a particular frame. Robin took it for storm clouds over a calm sea turned gory by the setting sun. It wasn't that he liked seascapes so much as that they offered the charm of the familiar. Generations of his family had been Royal Navy and he'd grown up with Squall in the Narrows, Dawn Over the Bay of Bengal and suchlike. Instead of leaving, he walked over to investigate.

Disappointingly, the picture turned out to be a domestic interior, a kitchen by the look of it, probably turn of the nineteenth century. The clouds were—he couldn't be bothered to make out what they were—and the sunset sea was a tiled floor in need of a damned good scrubbing. Five wasted paces, yet seconds later Robin remained in place.

No expert, as we have established, he was trying to calculate whether this was a very good picture that was easy to overlook or an amateurish effort, out of its league. Its clumsiness could be deliberate and clever, to those capable of appreciating an artist's

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intention. Maybe so much featureless floor with everything else crammed in the top right corner was clever, too.

"Everything else" came down to a wooden chair, graceless and putting him in mind of Van Gogh, except that the chair on the tiles didn't gladden the eye. *It's got something, all the same,* Robin told himself, and then he leaned forward, wondering how he could have been so unobservant.

He'd assumed that dark blobs and blotches on the chair made up a poorly rendered coat or shawl thrown over the ladder-back. No such thing: It was an old woman sitting there. At which point Robin Ratcliffe caught on at last.

He was looking at a trick picture, like Magritte's musical instrument which is also a face. Or those more elaborate novelties: the painted surface is corrugated so that the subject depends on one's angle. Change that and the subject melts from a beauty in full finery to a solitary macaw profiled on its perch.

The chair thing was so take-it-or-leave-it simple—what I see is what you get and it interested me, so put that in your pipe and smoke it, the artist seemed to snarl—that the concept of a deliberate illusion hadn't occurred to Robin.

Now that he was studying rather than glancing, it was obvious. The whole thing was a double bluff, overtly naive and unskilled but (cliché, sorry) fiendishly cunning. A visual equivalent to the breed of con man playing the hick to take marks off-guard.

There she was, the old woman, waiting to be found.

Go away, whined a voice at the back of Robin's mind, and of course he ignored it. Her back was turned to the viewer. Yes, he made out the curve of her spine and a large, lumpy head, except that it had to be one of those coal-scuttle bonnets. An unlikely, awkward blotch of shadow on the side of the chair was her hand, evidently black-gloved.

That accounted for the impression of arrested movement, once the figure came into focus and revealed itself. She'd heard footsteps or the creak of a door and she was about to peer over her shoulder . . . The longer he stared, the more he saw.

Gloved fingers gripped the chair, and if the shadows dispersed one would find her thin arm braced and straining to swivel the meager body. Okay, done that, a bored strand of his thinking ran. Let's be on our way.

Urgency wasn't involved, as it had been with the earlier, near-subconscious pleading to be anywhere but near the old woman. Mission Control sent the message that he was emerging from a medium-bad hangover, not before time, and some food would be appreciated.

Robin Ratcliffe's tale ended there, first time around, with a hangdog grimace. In newspaper jargon I'd wasted attention on a

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"delayed drop," meaning introductory matter unfolded at length—only there was nothing to follow. Politely put, an anticlimax; less politely, he had suckered me into a shaggy-dog story and I'd missed the punch line.

Except that Robin wasn't like that. The trivial incident—as it seemed at first telling—had impressed him enough to share it. Shortly afterwards, our flight was called or the lift doors opened and the man we awaited stepped out—for the life of me I cannot recall the setting or how we came to be talking about a picture in the first place.

My memory is no worse than the next fellow's, whoever he is. I have good recall of what Robin Ratcliffe told me over a five-year period. It's just that I was pinballing around the world at the time, one eye on my watch, waiting for the Tilt light to start flashing—missed deadline or faulty telex machines, on which one relied in the primitive era a quarter-century or so ago. Actually, now that it's going on paper I *do* remember where he told me, and belatedly, a connection is made.

Robin started explaining about the art gallery because . . .

Regrettably, British journalists, Her Majesty's Press, are a bit of a handful overseas. Some of them, anyway. Repressed individuals may become roaring boys and roaring boys morph into—you get the idea. As my first Foreign Editor told me, "You can claim ridiculous expenses, get thrown out of the country—always good for the image—abduct the women and slaughter the men. The only thing you can't do is . . . *fail.*"

Golly, that pumped me up. Under such pressure, with sketchy knowledge of foreign languages thrown in, no wonder many of the boys (and girls, in their own ways) cut loose after the story's filed.

All fairly harmless, if rotten diplomacy, and we always pay for breakages.

This is not a digression, honestly. Hacks need a hotel with reliable communications and your average hotel fitting that bill needs guests who won't frighten the horses. Lottie Totty—Eastern European with a virtually all-consonants name, so that's what she was to us—perceived a niche market allowing her to charge four-star prices for a decent boardinghouse.

It's right behind the train station in a European capital. Lottie Totty installed half a dozen telex machines in the basement, beefed up the switchboard, dedicated ten percent of overheads to the Ministry of Posts and Communications, and did terrific business. The city was a hub or crossroads and several times a year the hacks would hurtle in, pack the Pension Whatever, and do wonders for her offshore bank account.

We'd been resident for ten days—an uprising, we were waiting

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for famous dissidents to flee across the border and they were fleeing in slow motion if at all. Robin Ratcliffe was ousted early on, though he slunk back frequently for fear of missing anything the rest of the pack had scavenged. Lottie shook her head until her cleavage blurred, in the course of refusing to reveal his offense.

The consensus was that it must have been incredibly violent or perverted. Lottie Totty ran—I suppose you could term it a frat house for allegedly mature adults. Our sort of guests helped themselves at the little bar and scribbled the price in an exercise book hanging on a string. You paid well over the odds for your room so what went on there was none of Lottie's never-mind.

Then Henry Potter lost patience with our rumors. Henry's older than God, doyen of foreign correspondents. Lottie Totty kept two adjoining rooms free on the top floor and they were Herr Potter's Suite. The only other guest near him had been Robin Ratcliffe.

"You're a pack of gossiping applewomen," Henry Potter declared, three days after Robin's expulsion. "I complained because the idiot was making such a racket that I couldn't sleep. Snoring's forgivable but strangled bloody screams are unacceptable when indulged in at length, nightly. Satisfied, you . . . *children?* This correspondence must now cease. The Editor."

Some of us believed that he and Lottie were more than good friends. Possibly Robin had caught her sneaking into HP's bower, that would do it. On the other hand, the old boy's irritation at having his sleep ruined was convincing. Either way, the solution was disappointing. Lurid had been far more fun.

We were at the airport when Robin started edging into his account. The dissidents having refused to oblige, everyone was returning to London. Now that I think about it, his shaggy-dog story was an oblique apology for making a fool of himself at the Pension Whatever. I expect he assumed that Potter had gone into cruel detail, and Robin wanted me to put his nightmares into context. Only his nerve failed, so he just trailed away and thought his thoughts . . .

Six months after the Lottie Totty affair, there was a small war—little more than crockery rattled and plumage ruffled all round—but my paper is into shot and shell, so off I went. Robin Ratcliffe's lot were eccentric enough to consider sensationalism A Bad Thing, but a deputy editor had made his bones in the region and considered it important enough to warrant coverage.

There we were, Robin, me, and a couple of thugs from the Daily Dire, out for glory and desperate to beat us *and each other,* the idiots. He and I took to slipping away first thing every morning and working the story together. (We'd bribed the hotel people twice over to inform us what the thugs were telling the Dire and not inform the thugs of what we'd filed. Their bribe had been inad-

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equate, or our shared resources made it so.)

Slipping away was all very well, but misery likes company and we could have done with the thugs aboard the armoured personnel carrier when it ran into an ambush. Not even an ambush for us, that was the pig of it. Bad enough for homicidal lunatics to try killing a harmless stranger, i.e oneself. To be caught between opposing sets of organised loonies who don't even know you're there, stalled in a fold of desert with mortar rounds going one way and a hull-down tank's shells replying from a quarter-mile away . . .

Terror turns me glumly thoughtful. At least I don't wet myself or bite people, which I have seen happen. Robin's reaction was strange enough to break my trance. One would swear he looked . . . relief wasn't quite it, but a weight was off his shoulders. "Funny," he mumbled, "I never thought it would be this way . . ."

Then he told me more about the art gallery. We all repeat ourselves at times, and he had every excuse to gabble the first thing in his head. Though he wasn't gabbling, just thinking aloud. I didn't stop him because the partly familiar recital provided a distraction and I willed myself to listen carefully, concentrate.

Much later—the tank went away, the mortar team ran out of ammunition or motivation, I was on the plane back to London—I realised that Robin Ratcliffe's story had changed. Wrong word: Developed was what it had done.

Fleeting unease over, Robin felt pleased with himself, there in the recently airless side room of the gallery. He was no barbarian, the Boring Respectable Paper doesn't keep them on strength for long, but in the Bible's phrase he was "as the beasts that perish" when it came to art appreciation.

His sister was an enthusiast and for years he'd tried to see what she did—brushwork and textures, skin tones, handling of light, a painter's signature palpable in everything save the autograph in a bottom corner. Robin concluded that he was artistically unmusical.

Now, however, he was appreciating nuances and making sophisticated observations. Evidently he was a late starter.

Almost nose to nose with the canvas, all Robin could make out was an uneven layer of old paint, mainly black where it wasn't a dismal reddish-brown—the tiled floor—and indefinably tarnished or bloomed. No sign of the woman, and if he hadn't known a chair was there . . . Too close, so he retreated again, expecting to decode what had been there before.

Except—ah yes, there it was. One's eyes needed to adjust to the altered distance. Chair and woman present and correct. A sitter in both senses of the term; Robin smirked. No doubt of it, he'd made a breakthrough. Until this morning the notion of understanding that the artist had captured arrested motion like that would have

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been beyond him.

It really was amazingly clever: Had this painting been a photograph taken one second later, then the old lady would be on her feet and looking out from the frame. Robin's mouth dried and his breath caught. The din and vibrancy of the avenue was paradise when he found himself at the foot of the gallery's imposing steps, and harsh sunlight had never been more welcome.

He shirked explaining what had happened; there was a jump-cut between gloating over connoisseurship and running for his life.

The personnel carrier's engine caught at last, and this time the clown failed to stall it. We backed up very fast; the little-more-than-tin box kept bouncing off the mini-valley's crumbling banks but kept going. I was too occupied in silently thanking Whatever There Is to wonder what had made Robin flee from that painting. Sorting the ins and outs of an ambiguous anecdote had low priority.

Then the paper found a better war for me just up the road by Foreign Desk measurement, meaning two countries away. The Boring Respectable believed in finishing anything they started. I didn't see Robin again that year or for most of the next.

I heard about him, though. He'd always been an amiable character, so when he started getting snappish and cutting up rough, people noticed. One morning three different chums on as many different papers rang me with exciting gossip. Robbo Ratcliffe had gone crazy and assaulted the Church Correspondent at the Boring Respectable, of all targets. Simon Trimble, his name was; we'd trained together in the provinces.

Anyone more inoffensive was hard to imagine. Lack of personality decreed that there was no Trimble to like or dislike, let alone assault with violence. He was just a fact on two legs, reasonably effective at his job.

The first caller alleged that Robin had broken Simon Trimble's jaw; the second had Simon being rushed out of the newsroom with an eye dangling on his cheek; the third didn't specify injuries but understood that S. Trimble was on his way to surgery as we spoke.

It's never as bad or good as wild rumors insist. Trimble wanted to get at a phone, Robin was in the way and deep in thought, Trimble tapped him on the shoulder . . . A split second later Robin was helping him off the floor and Trimble knew what it was like to have a broken nose.

"You startled me," Robin mumbled. And to the newsroom at large, "He startled me, all right?"

It wasn't, of course. By ill fortune the Boring Respectable's editor and Lord Somebody the proprietor, lunching the deputy prime minister in the boardroom that day, were giving him a tour en route to the trough, and witnessed the disagreement. Worse yet, the paper had been running a long, tut-tutting campaign on behalf

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of civilised behaviour in all ranks of society.

Robin Ratcliffe's exploit, an instant legend (journos *are* a pack of old applewomen, Henry Potter hadn't slandered the trade), was pounced on by *Private Eye,* the satirical magazine: There was a cartoon of two chaps walking past a stately-home entrance with an ambulance outside—"They're expecting a reporter from the Boring Respectable . . ." one says to the other.

The BR hates landing in *Private Eye* and media-watch columns of the opposition. Punching a blameless colleague is gross industrial misconduct within the meaning of the relevant Act of Parliament. The union can't do a thing if you're fired and employment tribunals don't want to know. The Boring Respectable tempered justice with mercy: Robin was given a year's severance pay and escorted off the premises.

In an elegant phrase I picked up from the U.S. military, my friend had screwed the pooch. He'd joined the Boring Respectable straight from university, he had worked for no other paper and what was more, he'd never wanted to. In that era, Fleet Street jobs were easier to come by, but whether he could be happy or even much use at my shop, for instance, was dubious.

The chance didn't arise because he laid low after the notorious Fistfight at the BR Corral. Ring his flat and the answering machine never inspired him to call back.

Sadie, my wife, predicted that Robin was finished. She is the bright half of the partnership, a watcher who sees more of the game. Keeps pouring the drinks, listens more than she talks. Sadie pointed out that the Ratcliffes were a modestly moneyed clan and Robin had a trust fund from some grandma or other.

"Just enough to keep him afloat, not enough to stop him feeling sour and hard-done-by, down the road." She gave me a hug. "That's why I stick with you—nothing like a working-class boy made good, they toil away from force of habit. Class isn't everything, my love." I'm sure she was just teasing.

It's much easier to uphold "No man is an island" when doing nothing troublesome about it. I kept telling myself I'd hunt him out and gee him up, give him a name or two to approach—without making the effort. Robin might still be hurting and resent my intrusion, was the cop-out.

Gradually he slipped to the back of the filing cabinet. About a year later my shop offered a David Hockney reproduction lithograph for free, featuring it on the cover of the Saturday color supplement. Tiled floor, a director's chair half in sunlight, lots of blue California sky. It put me in mind of Robin through being so unlike *his* hoodoo picture, and I wondered for all of ten seconds what that had been all about.

While no sounder on art than Robin, I have been known to put

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my nose into the occasional gallery. Now that I bothered to notice, there were no end of interiors and still lifes in myriad styles showing furniture and flooring. Half-consciously I would think, *Not that one* or *It's a plank floor* or *Can't be those tiles, they're glowing, really gladden the eye.*

Sadie was first with news of Robin Ratcliffe. She heard from a mutual friend just back from vacation that Robin was living in Mexico as an upmarket beach bum, supposedly involved in a jet-ski rental venture but hardly knocking himself out over it. "Told you so," Sadie said. "Trust Robbo to go to seed in a good climate."

A similar report surfaced a long while afterwards, only this time Robin was loafing around the French Alps.

Then in the mid 'seventies we ran into each other during a baggage-handlers' strike at Heathrow Airport. I'd been looking at Robin, among other castaways, for minutes before recognising him. Terrific tan and hair so sun-bleached that I'd taken it for a peroxide job.

He was pleased to see me and I was inquisitive, so the long delay became acceptable in a flash. . . . Robin was on his way back to Cyprus, where by implication he was based these days. Good jumping-off spot for the entire Middle East, he said in a slightly defensive way I found puzzling.

Ah, great, I said, so you're back in the business—what, freelancing, running other freelancers, where do you fit in? Vague and evasive, he talked of looking around, weighing up the market and seeking a niche; or maybe he'd try writing a book instead. Sounded uncannily like bone idleness to me.

Still, he was talkative enough on other matters, and I couldn't decide whether to be embarrassed on his behalf—Robin was pushing forty, addressing someone digging his heels in at the approach of the big five-oh—or amused and compassionate. He enthused like a teenager. He had Met Somebody and she'd turned his life around.

"God, Charlie, fate and chance, eh? None of us knows what is for the best. . . . It seemed the end of the world when the Respectable fired me but if they hadn't, then I would never have met An—Annabelle—and that . . . Brrrr! Makes my blood run cold." Robin laughed joyously enough to draw attention to us.

He had it bad, poor chump. They do, eternal bachelors of the heterosexual persuasion, on falling in love at last. Annabelle (Robin produced the hastily-altered name without hesitation next time around) had been the making of him, he enthused. "I was in a bad way, on the sly. It crept up on me. Well, that picture obsession . . . did I ever tell you about a picture that gave me the horrors?"

There'd been fleeting references, I agreed with a poker face. Robin was only half listening, a fault with besotted lovers. "My mind was . . . I dunno, an attic full of garbage I'd let pile up, cob-

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webs and dead flies and Lord knows what." Another of those good-to-be-alive laughs. "She spring-cleaned me! Came along, opened all the windows . . . Oh, I wish you could meet her, you will one day."

A little of that lasts me ages. "Married, I take it?" Why else would Robin stumble over naming her, but he gaped at me. He was rusty; good reporters don't need too many clues.

"Yes," he conceded, slightly cast down. "It's not sordid, mind you. He's old enough to be her father, it's a hollow marriage. His career depends on having a wife; in fact, Annabelle's probably the main reason he has a career. He's agreed to divorce her as soon as he retires—I don't want to talk about it." But of course he did do, avoiding the goddess's awkward marital status but extolling her peerless worth.

His mistress, Robin asserted with a trace of reproach, had been the only person to perceive that he was a seriously sick puppy. "She nursed me, just by talking, and turned me clean around. Somehow I'd let things warp me out of shape, you see. I mean, that gallery thing . . . Annabelle says the first thing we'll do when she is free, is go to New York so I can spit in that old hag's eye—metaphorically, of course."

Only now that he could mock what had poisoned his peace of mind did Robin Ratcliffe tell me the full story of that gallery visit. He was celebrating release from self-generated torture, and championing his lover as a miracle worker.

He spoke of the previous Robin Ratcliffe as he might have of a stranger to be pitied for falling prisoner to a bizarre delusion. The recollection was punctuated by his head-wagging, "What an *idiot!*" or "That gives you an idea of how much trouble I was in."

He was walking away from the camouflaged woman in the chair, still considering the concept of arrested motion and its depiction on canvas, when Robin stopped dead.

A voice, clear although unspoken, enquired coldly: *What makes you so sure that she is not moving behind your back?* His shoulders crawled and breathing took a conscious effort. Robin didn't fear or suspect or torment himself with an impossible fantasy. He simply knew that behind his back the old woman was shifting on that beastly chair.

He did not want that to be so, he really didn't. Crushed by overwhelming, imperious dread, Robin's fear was total. If he ever saw her face . . . That would be bad, very, very bad.

It wasn't horror-movie stuff, the new Robin Ratcliffe broke off to assure me. He hadn't expected a stripped skull within the dark cage of bonnet, or a hideous face deformed by hatred and malice. It was just that if she set eyes on him, and he met her gaze . . .

"That's the crazy part, I had no idea what would happen next,

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apart from it being unthinkably . . . well, not in my best interests," said Robin, cocky enough now to be fake-pompous. "And there was something else—she'd been waiting for *me.* She was set there to recognise certain people, God knows how many or why, and if I hadn't happened to wander in I'd have been safe. I mean, how daftly weird is that?"

Hence the subsequent nightmares. He'd be back in the gallery, but it was a split second after meeting the painted woman's eye and indescribable ruin was his next heartbeat away.

At the nadir of what he recognised as a nervous breakdown, Robin no longer needed to be asleep for the nightmare to grip. He could be on a Tube train or the treadmill in the gym and freeze, screaming inwardly while awaiting the worst. It was Simon Trimble's bad luck that Robin was in the middle of one such session when Si nudged him . . .

Yes, I said, but we hadn't finished with the original thing. What did he see when he was forced to confront the painting?

"Now I've got you at it—there was nothing to see, man. Paint on canvas." Robin pulled a face. "But I didn't have the guts to prove that," he admitted.

He'd stood there, crouched and wincing, shaking, until to his horror his head started pulling round towards the far wall of the side room. "Think iron filings and magnet."

What broke the spell was the sight of the edge of a now-familiar frame, right at the corner of his eye. "I'd made it all so real—the old crone was in charge, but I was so spit-scared of her that I wrenched away in a panic. It felt . . . physical, like the air was sticky, might as well have been Velcro, I swear I felt it catching and parting around me. But I was frantic, and suddenly I was falling over my own feet because it was easy to move again. I ran like hell, straight out of there."

I had hand luggage—sensible foreign correspondents travel light, it saves vital time at the other end—and Robin's cases were aboard a truck somewhere out in the airport triangle, so we parted a few minutes later. He gave me an address in Cyprus and said to look him up next time I passed through.

I was pleased that he'd come out of the tunnel, but human nature made one prefer the old Robin Ratcliffe, moodiness, neurotic delusions, and all. The spring-cleaned model looked ten years younger; obviously he was footloose and getting plenty of fulfilling, non-meaningless sex. Naturally I envied him like mad.

And little more than a year later he was dead.

Having sprained my ankle, I was copy tasting for the Foreign Desk while somebody was on holiday. The AP item was in the U.K.-side follow-ups basket before I did a mental double take and

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retrieved it. Two sentences with a Beirut dateline: Robin Ratcliffe, British businessman, killed by a gunman in the street. Ratcliffe had moved to Lebanon only three months ago, and he was believed to be a victim of mistaken identity.

British papers made a little more of it than that, though not much.

I was shocked, but once that passed, not unduly surprised. Lebanon had long been martyred by a political-religious civil war and the Palestine Liberation Army's presence and influence weren't helping. That made it a good place for a freelance reporter to operate and a bloody awful one for life expectancy.

The following year I learned that for myself, during five weeks in West Beirut, covering the Israeli army's siege and its sequel, Chairman Arafat and Co. turfed out. Interesting times, as the Chinese put it. I wouldn't have missed it for worlds—and how splendid it was to get out of there.

Don't quote me, but I'm a fair feature writer and a poor reporter. Survival depends on sticking with better ones, which is how Digger Purnell and I became joined at the hip. It used to be a rite of passage for many Oz hacks to spend awhile on a British paper and I'd eased his way through mine, until Digger sprinkled vodka into the managing editor's wastebasket and set it alight, "to liven up the stuffy bugger." That was too rich for our blood and he was off on his travels once more.

Digger settled in Beirut before the civil war began; he spoke fluent bad Arabic and any local he didn't know, he knew of. A sound man, the hooligan.

We were having dinner at the Commodore one night—out there in the cement garden with its emptied, dangerously deep, slipper-shaped swimming pool and the parrot doing perfect imitations of incoming artillery rounds—and maybe an empty chair sparked an association of ideas. "Did you see much of Robbo Ratcliffe when he was here?"

"Not as much as some saw." Digger's a professional Australian and they can be wearing. Digger in cryptic, I-know-and-you-do-not mode is even worse, so I didn't bite.

"Doesn't matter, I just wondered what the heck he was doing here."

"He was shagging somebody's wife," Digger informed me matter-of-factly. He said that the husband was an executive of a company I have no intention of naming, to protect the adulterous. "Yeah, Robbo followed her wherever her old man was posted, like a little doggie. When they were here, before things got really bad, she'd sneak over to Cyprus for fun 'n games. The Mister was sweet provided they didn't carry on under his nose.

"But madam found better fish to fry and stopped going to Cyprus. So Robbo upped sticks and based himself here, bloody fool. Somebody, uh, found that unacceptable."

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"You mean . . . ?"

"Put it this way: He got blown away by a man in military fatigues and a barracks cap. PLO or local militia, moonlighting. The job cost twenty pounds sterling, I know that for a fact." (Later, gingerly, I tried the concept on a PLO officer for credibility, and his verdict was, "Twenty? Some of my men would do it for a pack of cigarettes. Or a kind word.")

That night, uncertain whether Digger Purnell was making it up as he went along, to impress me with insider stuff, I objected, "You said the husband didn't mind."

"Typical dim pom, never listens! Chilly Willy wasn't around anymore, was he. He'd been posted home-side, she stuck around for a while. It was her new fancy man, scared Robbo might get her back." Digger cackled and cocked an eye over the candle in its red glass globe. "I wouldn't have minded a punt at her myself, she was tasty, but I dropped that idea after what happened. Fine chance, anyway—after Robbo got himself scragged she shot straight home to hubby. So the guy who paid the piper invested twenty quid for nothing. Serve him right. Your round, Charlie."

That was a weird siege: West Beirut was cordoned off and under sporadic attack from land, sea, and air (gunboats with missiles), yet there were quiet spells and it was a relatively large area. One needed wheels, meaning a taxi.

Sharif was my driver. He'd owned a restaurant and a decent house by what had been the St. George's Hotel, and some rental property, and now he had his car. Like many of them, not your standard cabbie. I don't know how he discovered that I'd known Robin Ratcliffe—nothing stayed private around the Commodore, the waiters listened out and everybody was somebody's kinsman, a cousin or thereabouts.

One morning we were rolling along Hamra, the main shopping street, when Sharif observed, "Mr. Robin was a nice man. A happy man." Here he sighed heavily, obviously thinking that he had been the same, longer ago than he cared to remember. "He lived in one of my apartments, the Is-ra-aelis got it last month, it was the last of them. I had many flats."

I made a neutral sound. Terrible thing to say, but true: He was lucky compared to some. Still had his skin—and the Mercedes. Sharif pulled over. "I saw it happen. Over there. No, here on my side." His tone was casual, much as you'd use when indicating a minor landmark to a tourist.

"I was in Hamra constantly when I had businesses, that is how I saw it happen, there where I point. It was a restaurant," he added helpfully. We were looking at a hole in the frontages where the remains of an industrial-size freezer and a catering range showed

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through heaped rubble and charcoal beams bulldozed towards the back.

A sole surviving chair, the aluminium, stackable kind, leaned drunkenly out of the gap and a stray mongrel was lifting a leg against it.

There'd been a canopy, and the chairs stood at tables in its shade, with little bay trees in tubs to divide them from passersby. Sharif saw his tenant Robin Ratcliffe pause outside the restaurant. A man in olive-drab had been some distance behind. Once he was closer, he drew his pistol and shot Robin through the head, hardly breaking stride to do so.

The gunman kept walking. Everybody in the vicinity sat tight until he went down an alley, although he had holstered the weapon while his target was hitting the ground. The incident was not uncommon in civil-war Beirut and a certain etiquette had emerged.

I knew the alleged motive for the killing and I expect Sharif did, too, but we dropped the subject by tacit agreement. However, he took to pausing outside the ex-restaurant if we weren't in a hurry to get anywhere and Digger was not in the car.

It got on my nerves but I kept quiet in case Sharif put a higher value on life than I'd assumed, and it was his way of signalling regret. Towards the end, when the PLO was on its way out and American and French and Italian troops—feathered headgear when they landed, very dashing—held the ring, Sharif pulled over and this time he mentioned something else.

"It was strange," he said meditatively. "I wanted to speak to Mr. Robin, that was why I was watching. I meant to offer a long lease at a good rate, he was a tenant I wanted to keep.

"A delivery was finishing, and soon there would be space to park, but I didn't want to get blocked in. If Mr. Robin looked round, I could call him over, talk of the lease. He was staring at the window of the restaurant.

"There was nothing to see, the blinds were . . . the strips were joined, it was just a shut blind, the place was closed. But he was looking, looking." Sharif made that catlike hiss some Lebanese emit to signal incomprehension laced with impatience. "What else could make him stare—empty tables, empty chairs?

"He could not have seen the soldier coming, he was looking the wrong way. But he did see, though his back was turned, he shouted, 'No, no!' and covered his eyes just as the soldier shot him. Strange . . ."

And we rolled on, with me speechless and . . . preoccupied, you might say.

No, I do not believe that the Seated Woman escaped from the canvas and crossed the world to ambush Robin Ratcliffe in Beirut. He didn't see her where his reflection belonged in that restaurant

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window, or find her in one of those metal chairs, invisible to anyone but him.

It's insulting to even suggest that I might consider the notion. I am a twenty-first century adult, after all.

Admittedly Sharif had no reason to lie to me. I am confident that he didn't, for that matter. Nonsense is talked about death meaning less in the Middle East—the stereotype is hard to sustain if you attend funerals there. But death is taken differently, maybe because there is so much of it.

Sharif had accepted his tenant's demise and when we talked he was mildly puzzled by the Englishman's last moments, that was all. Making my flesh creep was not his intention.

With my modern-adult hat on, it is obvious that Robin saw the gunman's reflection and reacted. Or the whole thing could have been happenstance—he sneezed, say, moving suddenly, and Sharif misinterpreted what he saw. That must have been it, of course it was.

On the other hand, the woman made of shadows was the end of Robin Ratcliffe, one way or another. He said it himself: If that picture hadn't preyed on his mind he'd never have lashed out and been fired from the Boring Respectable, and then he would not have met the woman he called Annabelle, earning his appointment with a bullet. It makes one think, though I'd rather not.

Of course I refuse to consider the supernatural. Only . . .

Quite recently I was in New York on an assignment and met a charming woman of a certain age who took a shine to me. All harmless, naturally, I'm a married man. He said. We shared one of those days when everything goes right and middle-aged fools go a little crazy. Manhattan in springtime, say no more.

We were strolling down never mind which avenue when she clutched my arm and exclaimed, "Oh, my very favorite place, let's go in." I looked at the steps and I saw the name of the place carved in the granite lintel . . . I knew what I'd encounter there, just knew it.

The next bit is humiliating. I made a thing of slapping my brow and cursing, and said sorry, terrible rudeness, I'd just remembered something incredibly urgent demanding my attention at the bureau, not a second to waste. I didn't hear what the lady replied—though from the tone anger and contempt were in there—because I was jogging away before she could comment.

I am a rational being and therefore I do not believe in the Seated Woman. But supposing she knows better, and believes in *me* and a message I would much rather not receive? Wiser, surely, to steer clear and remain ignorant as to which of us is correct. ●

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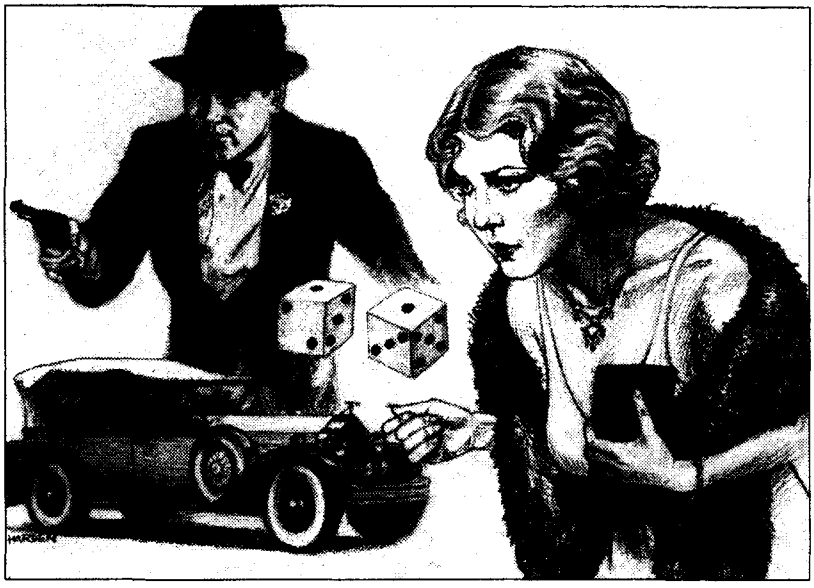

Art by Laurie Harden

SOCIETY BLUES

by Ruth Francisco

October, 1935. Dr. George Kendall Dazey arrived home for a late lunch, hoping to see his wife before dashing back to Santa Monica Hospital for Mrs. Ruby Crockett's operation at 3:45. He parked his maroon Roadster at the corner of Twenty-third and Georgina, and cut across the lawn to his front door.

As he stepped over the spongy grass, trying not to muddy his shoes, he glanced up: A white figure appeared to be floating inside the front window. He heard a crash followed by a frustrated moan. He ran to the front door. It was locked. "Doris! Are you all right?" Breaking into a sweat, he jammed his key into the lock and swung open the door.

Teetering tiptoed on the edge of a dining-room chair, Doris reached for the top of the Dutch cupboard. She yanked a candy dish off the top shelf and thrust her fingers beneath the pale-blue wrappers. "Goddammit!" She whirled the dish across the room; butterscotch candies skittered over the terra cotta tiles like hail.

"I found all of your hiding places when you were away," Dazey said calmly. He placed his medical bag on the dining-room table,

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then took off his hat and coat.

Doris spun around and fell back into the cupboard, yelping as the sharp shelves dug into her ribs. "I hate you," she hissed, swatting away his hand. "Don't touch me! Leave me alone!" She lost her balance and grabbed the shelves. The cupboard rocked forward: Porcelain cups and glass goblets slid and shattered on the floor. As she let go, the chair wobbled and her foot slipped. Dazey rushed to catch her.

She punched his arms, smacking his spectacles across the room. The chair tipped over and she fell on top of him. Dazey's legs buckled and they both tumbled to the floor. She beat his chest, thrashing wildly. "Let go of me, you bastard!"

He grabbed her wrists and rolled her over, straddling her as gently as he could. He glanced down at her legs, spread-eagled, her nightgown hitched up around her waist, her thighs bloody, cut from the broken glass. He felt hollowed out, as if a cold damp cavern had replaced the core of his being.

"Makes you hard, doesn't it?" She sang, taunting him. "Dr. Dick with his big fat prick, puts you to sleep with a candy stick."

He couldn't bring himself to slap her. He leaned on her wrists and brushed his nose over her naked shoulder, breathing her in, whispering as if to a baby, "Shh, darling, quiet. Everything is all right." She groaned, relaxing, then burst into tears.

He sat back on his heels and let her cry for a few moments. He then wrapped one arm around her waist, the other under her knees, and lifted her carefully. She clung to his neck, whimpering softly like a child yanked from the path of an oncoming train.

As he carried his wife upstairs, her perfumed heat seeped from her torn nightgown. Her breath smelled of sherry as she gulped for air. He must have missed a bottle in the kitchen used for cooking. Doris hadn't.

"I'm so scared!" she sobbed, clutching at his collar.

"There's nothing to be frightened of," he assured her, which set off another set of howls in sliding octaves, slicing the air like scimitars in a ritual dance.

He kissed her hair, his lips trembling. Nothing was enough. Not his love, not his drugs, not his professional expertise. He stood by

Ruth Francisco's first short story for *EQMM*, "Dream of Murder," also formed part of her second novel, *Good Morning, Darkness* (Mysterious Press/'04). At the time of our publication, reviews of the book were not in. Now they are, and here's what *PW* has to say: "The adroit plotting and additional fillip at the end are sufficiently compelling to qualify this as one of the year's best mysteries." Hats off to an extraordinarily promising new author! †

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helplessly as demons tried to scratch their way out of her skull. "It's okay, angel," he whispered. "I'm here. You're safe now." But he knew it wasn't true.

Dazey laid her on the bed. He tucked the pink satin sheet under her chin, leaving her left arm exposed. Her crooning subsided to a whimper; she followed his movements with watery blue eyes wide open. He pushed up the sleeve of her nightgown, unlocked a drawer in the bureau, and pulled out a black box that looked like a revolver case. He opened it. Inside sat ten prepared hypodermic needles packed as snug as bullets.

Dazey brushed her hair out of her face. Her beauty took his breath away. It always had.

They met in 1933 at the Cocoanut Grove. He was smitten by her, a tall, thin actress with honeycomb curls bouncing on her shoulders. Her large eyes, cerulean blue, were set off by a white lock of hair that started above her right eye and curled around her ear. Dazey knew immediately that she was ill, hopped-up on studio white, downing champagne with the thirst of a long-distance runner. He watched her from across the lounge: her eyes darting back and forth between the guests, her delicate hands gesturing to someone, then landing on her fur collar as if seeking warmth and security, like an injured sparrow chirping for help, fraying her broken wings as she beat the ground in fear and frustration. He yearned to save her.

Yet he knew even then that there would be no gratitude and little love. He knew that if an injured bird doesn't die in your care, it will peck your hands bloody to be free. He knew that one day she would hate him.

Many of his friends wondered what he saw in her, but to him her soul was as pure and elusive as a child's laugh, her beauty so intense, it nearly hurt him to look at her. She made him feel strong and capable and generous. She had once kissed his palms and told him they were like the sculptured hands of Michelangelo's "David." They made her feel safe, she said, words that flooded his body with love for her; if he could do this, to still her distress for even a moment, perhaps she could be saved.

Dazey dabbed her arm with alcohol and placed the used needle in a tray.

She closed her eyes, smiled, then opened them again. "I don't think I'll go out tonight," she said. "I think I'll stay right here."

"We'll see how you feel," he said cautiously. Even a hint of disapproval might send her on a frenzied escapade.

"Maybe I'll go pick up Wally and make you dinner."

Even now she was beautiful, he thought, her moist eyes sparkling like a grove of blue spruce after an ice storm, her mouth turned up sweetly. "I need to check on my patients," he said. "I'll be back in a few hours. Do you want me to have Betty Rose come stay

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with you?"

"No, I'm fine. I feel better now."

"Okay, my precious." He'd call Betty anyhow. "You get some rest." He kissed her on the forehead and left the door to her room ajar.

Later that evening, despite promises to her husband and reprimands from her maid, Doris dressed for a night out on the town.

She drove her chocolate-brown Packard to the palisade at the end of Pico Boulevard. The night was young, just beginning to take on a life of its own. Santa Monica Pier, lit up with Ferris wheels and amusement rides, twinkled below like a rhinestone bracelet on a colored chanteuse.

Slowly, she drove down the incline to the pier, through the crowds of teenagers, sailors, and lovers arm in arm, her tires clapping over the wooden planks. Garish lights spiraled around her like fireworks—pink, yellow, and blue. She inhaled deeply the scent of cotton candy and fried fish, and watched couples dance to Les Hite's big band broadcasting from Frank Sebastian's Cotton Club. Overhead, a roller coaster swooshed down like an avalanche, excited screams and laughter tumbling after like loose scree. The pier trembled with excitement.

She parked and stepped out in a white gown, white sable stole, and silver slippers. The cool ocean air rushed into her lungs; her eyes sparkled. She gazed out into the vast black ocean.

Anchored just beyond the three-mile limit, the casino ship *S.S. Rex* rocked in the gentle surf, its lights strung between its masts down to the bow and stern. Like a jeweled crown awaiting her coronation. She walked down the pier to the water taxis.

Thirty minutes later, under the warm golden glow of gas lamps, amid boisterous laughter, the clack of roulette wheels, and the squealing saxophones of Curtis Mosby's band playing "Society Blues," Doris tossed her dice like breadcrumbs to greedy gulls. She admired her graceful arms and her white hands. She saw others taking note of her, flattering her with long looks. Her temples pulsed, her breath quickened. She talked to no one except the croupier, reveling in her performance—the mysterious woman, cool and aloof.

She played for nearly an hour, losing more than she won. As she leaned forward to bet more chips, she glanced up through the window to the deck. Two men, escorted by the ship owner, Tony Cornero, strode past the gaming room, followed by two bodyguards. She caught her breath. She recognized the shorter man from a mug shot in *Ballyhoo* magazine. She remembered the headline: "Hollywood's Long-Legged Lookers Lindy-hop with Ganglord."

He wore a double-breasted overcoat that hung to his knees, a fedora pulled down over his brow; only his mouth and chin were visible. The block of flesh beside him turned his square head

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toward Doris in slow motion as if sensing her gaze. His eyes bored into her, a warning as clear as sirens before dawn.

Doris stood trembling, fascinated. A rush of heat and electricity pulsed through her; her cheeks felt cold, her upper lip moist.

"Snake eyes!" called the croupier. "You win, madam. Would you like to roll again?"

As if woken from a dream, Doris turned back to the table and picked up her dice. Snake Eyes: That was one of his nicknames. It was a sign.

Her eyelids fluttered shut; she clutched the edge of the table until her dizziness passed. She was shivering and her temples burned. Was her fever coming back? No, it must be the rush of the roulette wheels, and the gimlets she'd been drinking. She picked up her chips, cashed in her earnings, and tucked the crisp bills into her sequin purse. She pulled her stole around her shoulders and walked outside.

The sea air, heavy with moisture, aroused her, the breeze blowing her silk slip against her naked legs. Lights glittered on the water. The darkness called her.

Snake Eyes climbed down into a private boat, followed by his bull henchman. Quickly Doris walked to the other side of the ship, to the landing stage, and stepped into a water taxi that was nearly full with passengers. Moments later, the taxi pulled out toward the pier.

Doris sat involute among the gamblers, like a moon goddess on a starless night. The water taxi slapped over the rolling swells, the motor puttered. As they neared shore, the shadows under Santa Monica Pier appeared black and still, like evil intent beneath a nervous giggle.

As soon as her taxi docked, Doris hurried up the pier. She spotted the two men pausing in front of a striped canvas tent. She ducked behind a group of teenagers and bought a bag of peanuts. When she peeked back, she saw the men disappear into an arcade.

She followed, sidling into the noisy room. The clatter of games disoriented her. Children shot pop guns at clowns, threw beanbags at frogs, rolled bowling balls at pins. Old men took turns with boys at a pornographic kinetoscope. She noticed a narrow L-shaped hallway, lightless and cool. She slipped behind the Skee-Ball lanes into the dark.

The hallway was eerily quiet. She inched back, feeling the roughness of the wood through her slippers. Two closed doors stood at the end of the passage. A toilet flushed and the left door opened. A small weasel of a man shuffled past her buttoning up his pants.

Beneath the other door shined an inch of light. A brass plate mounted halfway up read *Manager.*

Doris slipped into the bathroom and shut the door. The moist air stank of human excrement. She let her eyes adjust to the dark-

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ness, listening: ocean waves crashing against the timber piles beneath her; bells and slamming balls from the arcade; and, in the next room, tense angry voices. She concentrated hard, but couldn't make out what they were saying. Then three thumps and a man's grunt. She looked up.

Several feet above, a streak of light the size of a quarter shone through a knothole in the plank. Her stomach quivered with excitement and dread. She stood on the toilet seat and peeked next-door.

The bull was kicking a man who knelt like a dog. The man's elbow gave way and he collapsed to the floor. Snake Eyes sat in a captain's chair, his face in dark shadow. He spoke quietly. Slowly he leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. The oil-skin lamp on the desk illuminated his face: It was heart-shaped, framed by a widow's peak, with heavy brows over small, close-set eyes. His thin lips barely moved when he spoke. He said something to the bull, who picked up the crumpled man and slammed him down in a chair in the corner. Snake Eyes stood, put on his hat, and walked toward the door.

As the gang boss reached for the doorknob, the bull pulled out a gun and shot the man in the chair. A second shot blew off the top of his head. They turned and left. As simply as if they had said goodbye.

Doris felt the man's guts smack against the wall. She clasped her hand over her mouth, corking a scream. The men entered the hallway and closed the door to the manager's office. Their shoes paused outside the bathroom.

She dropped her bag of peanuts, which scattered across the floor. Horrified, she pressed her back against the wall, holding her breath, expecting any moment for the bathroom door to slam open, for them to gun her down. Blood throbbed in her temples: Could they hear it? She prayed not to faint, but felt her legs becoming numb, her head inflating and floating away.

Then, two sets of footsteps walked rapidly out of the arcade.

Doris gulped for air. A sharp pain shot down her legs, her thighs trembled. She slid down the wall and sat on the toilet, gunshots still ringing in her ears. As she clung to a two-by-four stud, she brushed her hand across her cheeks, astonished at her cold tears. What a damn fool she was, she chided. Slowly her terror gave way to shame and disappointment.

She needed a drink badly. She needed people, happy, glamorous people. A place to erase this memory and plenty of others. The night wasn't over yet.

She stood, opened the door, and stumbled into the dank night.

The following afternoon, Dazey called his wife from his office across from Santa Monica Hospital. Still no answer. She'd been asleep when he stopped by at lunchtime. Now it was 3:15 P.M. If she had

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gone out or was napping, Betty Rose should have picked up the phone. Maybe they had gone out to do some shopping together.

He tried not to be alarmed. Perhaps she was still asleep and hadn't heard the phone. But normally Doris was up by this time of day.

Dazey knew not to panic with someone as unpredictable as Doris. Just the same, he felt strangely uneasy. He figured that he could make it home and back in fifteen minutes. If she fussed about being checked on, *spied on,* as she called it, he would invite her to dinner at one of her favorite clubs.

He slipped on his coat and grabbed his hat. He'd leave from his office door that led to the hall—wouldn't even tell the receptionist he was gone. He placed his hand on the doorknob.

"Dr. Dazey, they're ready for you in surgery."

He spun around, embarrassed as if caught sneaking into a matinee without paying. His nurse, hands on her barrel-sized hips, filled the doorway. "We aren't scheduled until three forty-five," he said plaintively.

"Dr. Grodin canceled, so they moved everyone up."

"When did you find out about this?" he demanded.

"Just now, sir. They're waiting for you."

Fuming, he tossed his coat and hat on his desk chair. He left his office, descended the stairs, and crossed the street to the hospital.

Even before she opened her eyelids, she felt the cool afternoon mist seeping in through the bedroom windows.

Silence hovered in the house. What had awakened her? The phone? Down the street, children laughed, a dog barked, a car started. The muted sun released the scent of gardenias into the damp air. She stretched her legs, enjoying the feel of the cool sheets. She felt deliciously alone.

She heard a thunk downstairs. Or was it outside? Was Wally throwing toys? Couldn't be—the baby was still at her parents'. "Betty?" she called, then remembered that, in a fit of pique, she had dismissed the maid. Probably it was the postman. She closed her eyes and sank back into her pillow, grateful for her solitude.

Her mind floated over the images from the night before; the memory seemed remote. Was it possible it hadn't happened? Where had she gone after the pier? She couldn't remember—some after-hours joint. She couldn't recall how she got home.

She opened her eyes and turned to the clock: It was 3:20. She wondered if George had come home for lunch. She seemed to remember sounds from the kitchen, maybe a figure in her bedroom. Had she been sick? She couldn't remember.

She heard knocking on the front door. Loud steady taps. She waited: Maybe they would go away. Three more taps. She swung her legs out of the bed, pulled on her turquoise pongee robe, and

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tied the sash tight around her waist. She looked for her slippers. They weren't under the bed; they weren't in the closet. *Tap, tap, tap.* Fiddlesticks. She ran her fingers through her hair, then left the bedroom.

As she descended the stairs, she saw the back of a gentleman through the glass panels in the front door. He had broad shoulders and wore a fedora. Had something happened to George? Suddenly worried, she opened the front door quickly, without hesitation.

Her first thought was that the mist was as heavy as a fine rain, and she worried for the man's cashmere coat, which was obviously expensive.

The man turned and moved toward her in an unhurried but forceful way, like the incoming tide, with comforting inevitability, extending his leather glove, pushing her gently into the house. She thought how handsome he looked, the brim of his hat pulled over his forehead, how handsome his collar, turned up under his square chin, how handsome his steady eyes that bore into her soul. *What has taken you so long?*

As she surrendered to his strong grip and his glove over her mouth, she was surprised at the soothing masculine strength of his damp woolly embrace.

Dazey returned home at around seven. He turned off the ignition, then the headlights. His hands fell into his lap, his body wearily sinking into the leather seat.

How much more could he take? he wondered. He was trained to be dispassionate, to be strong enough to witness pain and suffering. But he couldn't—not with Doris. He loved her so much, but he felt exhausted and spent. He guiltily admitted that sometimes he wished he could come home to an empty house.

He stepped out of his car and slammed the door, the vigorous movement lending him energy to make it across the lawn. The sky was gray, retaining a glimmer of twilight. He looked up through the bare branches of the jacaranda tree—gnarled crone fingers scratching at the October sky—and he thought of Doris's pale hands writhing in agony during one of her fits. He sighed heavily and walked up the front steps.

The windows were dark.

He opened the door, hung his coat and hat on a bentwood coatrack, and set his doctor's bag on a chair. He listened: The silence had an eerie sibilance. She must be dozing. He'd better go wake her or else she wouldn't be able to sleep through the night.

He went upstairs into their bedroom, opened the door, and turned on a light. The bed was unmade. The coffee cup he had brought to her that morning sat empty on her nightstand. By Doris's pillow, the *Santa Monica Evening Outlook* lay folded to the society page.

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"Doris?" He checked the bathroom. No one. He headed down to the kitchen. Maybe she had gone out?

Dazey stared at the bowl of oranges on the kitchen table. No note. He heard the faint sound of a car motor, the distinct putter of a Packard sedan. She must be just leaving, he thought. He banged open the kitchen door and dashed across the backyard to the side door of the garage.

He paused to catch his breath, then opened the door.

A blast of hot air slammed into his face. Toxic milky-gray gases swirled in front of his eyes. Coughing, waving his arms, he reached to the wall, felt for the light switch, and snapped it on. The rounded shape of the rumbling Packard was barely visible. He sprang forward and grabbed the handle on the driver's door. He swung it open and turned off the ignition.

He ran outside, gulped a mouthful of fresh air, then dashed back in. He tripped over something soft and fell, the heels of his palms slamming hard against the garage doors. He looked down. At first he thought it was a pile of rags. Then he saw the hair—there was so much of it. A wig? A Halloween costume?

Then he saw her profile.

He gasped, horrified, choking so hard tears sprang to his eyes. Grabbing the handle of the garage door, he shoved it open with his right shoulder.

Doris's body curved along the arc of the streetlight like the figure of a goddess poised on the edge of a Roman portico. Her face, an arm's length from the tailpipe, angled away from the car, her cheeks black with soot, her eyes partially closed, her hair spread out behind her as if facing a stiff wind.

He stared a moment, then, coughing violently, ran into the street. He buckled over and vomited.

Poisonous gases seeped into the street like a departing spirit.

He staggered back into the garage and knelt beside her. He pressed the artery at the base of her neck, checking for a pulse. Nothing. The throbbing blood he felt was his own.

He hurried into the house and came back with a wet towel. He tried to wipe the soot from her face, but managed only to streak it. He folded the towel and put it under her head, then sat back on his heels to look at her.

Grief would come later, he supposed, along with the inquest and accusations. But now all he felt was relief.

You can never save anyone, he realized. Not when one wants to die, not when one reaches out to Death like a flame to oxygen. He had always seen it in her, this tremulous wanting.

The sparrow had tumbled from her nest. Perhaps now she was free.

Were not all deaths suicides, he wondered. ●

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The World by the Tail

by Bill Pronzini

I was sitting in Jocko's Cafe, at my usual place in front of the open-air window facing Round Bay.

Jocko's isn't much. Just your standard back-island roadside bar and grill, mostly frequented by locals black and white and a few slumming tourists, on the southeastern tip of St. John, the smallest of the U.S. Virgin Islands. The road that loops around from Coral Bay ends fifty yards from Jocko's dirt parking lot. End of the line.

The building is two-storied, made of pink stucco, and flanked by palmettos and elephant's-ears; bar and food service downstairs, Jocko's quarters upstairs. The pocked-plaster walls are festooned with nautical paintings, none of them very good, and dozens of snapshots of customers with and without Jocko. The furniture is old and mismatched. There are a couple of ceiling fans, a bleached steer head mounted above the bar, a dartboard, and a blackboard with the daily menu chalked on it. Today's specials are every day's specials—conch chowder and callaloo, a pair of West Indian dishes.

That's because Jocko is West Indian, a native of St. Croix. Plump, hairless, skin as sleek and shiny as a seal's. In one ear he wears a big gold hoop that gives him a lopsided appearance. He smiles a lot, laughs often—a happy man.

The open-air window frames a view of the narrow inlet and the broad expanse of Round Bay beyond, and if you sit at the table in its exact center you can also see much of the far shore—the villa-spotted hills above Coral Bay, and the jungly slopes of Bordeaux Mountain, the highest point on St. John at 1,277 feet. That table and chair are mine by tacit agreement. On the rare occasions when I'm not in the cafe, Jocko refuses to let anybody else sit

Bill Pronzini is one of the most versatile writers working in the mystery field. Several recent books should interest his fans. Five Star Press has a new collection entitled *A "Nameless Detective" Casebook*, featuring Mr. Pronzini's most famous character (from 40 short stories and 28 novels). The most recent Nameless novel is *Spook* (Carroll & Graf). There's also a recent stand-alone novel, *Alias Man* (Walker 2004). ✝

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there. My seat, my window, my view.

On the scarred tabletop was my usual glass of Arundel Cane Rum. Arundel Estate is the oldest continuously operated distillery in the eastern Caribbean, and the only one that makes rum directly from sugar-cane juice. I won't drink anything else. Jocko imports it for me from Tortola, once the largest pirate community in the neighboring British Virgins. He does it because he likes me. And he likes me for the same reason he reserves my table: I'm his best customer.

We were the only occupants when the man in the yachting cap came in. He'd been in a couple of times before, once to eat lunch and once to drink a beer and give me a couple of curious looks. Big man in white slacks and a patterned island shirt, with a rough-textured face like something sculpted out of wet sand. The yachting cap didn't mean anything; he wasn't off any of the pleasure craft anchored out on Round Bay. One of the slumming tourists from Cruz Bay or Coral Bay.

This time he didn't sit at the bar. Thirty seconds after he walked in, he was standing between me and the window, looking down and smiling in a tentative way.

I said, "You're blocking my view."

"Oh, sorry." He gestured at one of the empty chairs. "Mind if I join you?"

"Why?"

"No particular reason. I've seen you here before—always alone. I thought you might like some company."

"As long as you don't block the view."

He positioned the chair carefully to my left, sat down, and fanned himself with his hand. "Hot."

"Not so bad today. You should be here in July and August."

"I'd rather not, thanks. My name's Talley, John Talley."

"Paul Anderson."

"Buy you a drink, Paul?"

"I wouldn't say no. Arundel Cane Rum, neat."

"I'll just have a cold beer. Too hot for rum." He called out the order to Jocko. "I'm a writer," he said to me.

"Is that right?"

"Books, stories, magazine articles. Down here from New York to look for material, soak up a little local color."

"And you think I might qualify in the color department. Rumpled, unshaven, rum-soaked—a character."

"Well, I'll admit you interest me."

Jocko brought the drinks and I had some of mine.

"I'm staying up at Coral Bay," Talley said. "I like St. John better than St. Thomas and this side of the island better than Cruz Bay. Fewer people, none of the conventional tourist atmosphere."

"So do I. For the same reasons."

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"Been in the Virgins long?"
"Twenty years. Almost twenty-one."
"Practically a native. You live out here on the tip?"
I nodded. "Saltbox up by Hansen's Bay."
"What's a saltbox?"
"Small square house. Cheap rent."
"What do you do for a living?"
"I don't do anything," I said.
"You mean you're out of work?"
"No. I mean I don't do anything. Except come here to Jocko's every day."
"Retired?"
"No."
"Independent means?"
"No."
"Then how do you make ends meet, if you don't mind my asking?"
I emptied my glass, watching the pleasure boats. Catamarans, mostly. Ketches, sloops, a couple of yawls. A big motor-sailer flying a British flag was making down around the point from Hurricane Hole. It'd be cool out there on her foredeck. The trades were blowing soft today.
"Sorry if I seem nosy," Talley said. "Writers tend to be that way. Nature of the beast."
"You really want to know how I make ends meet?"
"If you want to tell me."
"I stole some money once," I said.
"You . . . what?"
"Embezzled it, to be exact. There's still a little left. That's what I live on."
Talley moved in his chair, making it scrape on the rough tile floor. I wasn't looking at him, but I could feel the pressure of his eyes.
He said, "Are you serious?"
"I'm always serious."
"How much money did you embezzle?"
"Nearly half a million dollars."
"My God! You actually got away with that much?"
"That's right."
"When? How long ago?"
"Twenty-one years."
"And you were never caught?"
"Never close to being caught."
"How did you do it? Where?"
"It's a long story," I said. "And talking's thirsty work."
He signaled to Jocko.
I didn't say anything until I had a fresh glass in front of me. Then I said, "I was an accountant for an engineering firm in San

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Francisco, one of the largest in the west. I worked there for ten years. Lived a quiet life alone in a furnished apartment. No vices. Exemplary record. Completely trustworthy employee."

"What changed you into an embezzler?"

"Combination of things. A woman I wanted and couldn't have without a lot of money. Dreams of living a life of luxury in the tropics, never having to work anymore. The realization of how easy it would be, given my position with the firm. The challenge of planning it, setting it up, getting away with it."

"How did you go about it?"

"My job was in accounts payable," I said, "authorizing the payment of invoices from the firm's various subcontractors. I set up several dummy companies and arranged for the submission of monthly invoices of small to moderate sums, never more than a few thousand dollars, and authorized payment into dummy bank accounts. Then I opened a private account in the Cayman Islands and funneled the money into it a little at a time. I went about it all very carefully, very methodically. It took me a year to embezzle a total of $480,000. And to establish an untraceable new identity and make the necessary arrangements to disappear, so I would be free to spend it. When the time came, the Friday afternoon before the annual audit was scheduled, I left San Francisco and spent nearly two months traveling across country by car, train, bus, and plane, using assumed names and different disguises. Then I used my new identity to get to St. Thomas—no trouble at all. Annalise had already been in Charlotte Amalie a month by then—"

"Annalise? Oh, the woman. She was in on it, then?"

"Oh yes. From the first. She found the project as exciting as I did."

"Project. That's a nice way of putting it."

I shrugged. "She rented a villa, a large one at Limetree Beach, and let it be known that her husband would be joining her shortly. By the time I arrived she'd made several friends in the community—she had that knack. I was accepted immediately, without question."

"You never came under any kind of scrutiny?"

"No. Annalise and I did nothing to call undue attention to ourselves. And I was thinner than I'd been in San Francisco, I'd let my hair grow long and wore a moustache—I looked nothing at all like the embezzling accountant. We had no difficulty settling into the luxury lifestyle I'd always coveted—parties, fine dining, catering servants. I bought an old yawl and learned to sail, and we visited some of the other Caribbean islands, alone and with other couples. I had everything I ever wanted. I thought I had the world by the tail."

"But then the money ran out, is that it?"

"No. We spent a lot, yes, but I'd also invested a third of the original sum—wisely enough so that we had a steady supplementary income."

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"Then what did happen?" Talley asked.

"For a long time nothing happened. That was the problem."

"I don't understand."

I said, "You can change your financial status, your environment, your lifestyle, but you can't change your basic nature. You're still the same person. I led a dull, conservative life in San Francisco. Once the newness and the excitement wore off, I led a dull, conservative life in Charlotte Amalie. Even with the investments, we couldn't afford to live as we were indefinitely; I began to worry enough to start cutting back. Over a period of time we stopped traveling, stopped giving parties and being invited to parties, stopped going out to restaurants and clubs. The friends we'd made drifted away one by one. I lost interest in sailing and sold the yawl. I had no other hobbies or interests and neither did Annalise. After the sixth year all we were doing was staying home by ourselves, drinking too much and watching the sunsets."

"How did Annalise deal with that?"

"She hated it. We were barely communicating by then."

"I suppose eventually she left you."

"I knew she would. She started going out by herself every night, staying out late, and I just let her do it. One night she didn't come home at all. I never saw her again."

"What happened to her?"

"I don't know," I said. "I heard rumors that she went to Martinique with the owner of a yacht brokerage."

"But you didn't bother to find out."

"There didn't seem to be any reason to."

"What did you do after she left?"

"Nothing for a time. But the villa was too big and too expensive for one person, so I moved to a smaller place. The owner raised the rent after the first year and I moved again, an even smaller place near Frenchtown."

"Still alone?"

"Yes. There has been no one else in my life since Annalise."

"How long did you stay on St. Thomas?"

"Another two years. The tourist explosion had started by then and prices had skyrocketed. So I left the island for good."

"And came over to St. John?"

"No. St. Croix first. But my cottage there was burglarized one night, everything of value I had left stolen—everything except my bank books, which were hidden. That was when I moved to St. John. A bungalow in Coral Bay, then the saltbox at Hansen's."

"How long have you been here?"

"A little over four years."

"End of the line."

"That's right," I said. "End of the line."

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Flies circled listlessly in the hot breeze. Talley made wet circles on the tabletop with his sweating beer bottle.

"That's quite a story," he said.

"Meaning you don't believe it."

"I don't know if I do or not. You could have made it all up as a way to cadge free drinks. For all I know you tell it to every tourist who comes in here."

"Not every tourist. Only the willing listeners and free spenders."

"So it is just a story."

"I didn't say that."

"All right," Talley said, "for the sake of argument let's assume it's true, all of it or some of it. You must know I could turn you in to the FBI. This is federal territory, you're an interstate fugitive, and there's no statute of limitation on federal crimes—you'd probably still go to prison. There might be a reward of some kind, too, even after twenty years. In any case, I could buy myself a lot of free publicity and an article assignment if not a book contract. I told you I was a writer—why open up to me?"

"Maybe I'm just tired. Maybe I don't care anymore."

"Uh-huh. 'The Perfect Crime that Wasn't.' Not a bad title."

"But not accurate. The crime was perfect."

"You really believe that?"

"Yes. It was, but I'm not. That's the only flaw."

"Then let me ask you a hypothetical question," Talley said. "If you had it to do over again, would you still embezzle that money?"

I said without hesitation, "Yes."

"Even if you knew how things were going to turn out?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Why not? I got away with stealing close to half a million dollars. For a while I had everything I ever wanted. Would I have been any better off in a dead-end corporate job all those years, living in a furnished apartment in San Francisco?"

"You wouldn't have ended up an alcoholic fugitive in a place like this."

"One's no worse than the other, from my perspective."

We were silent for a time. Then Talley said, "Well," and pushed back his chair. "I'd better be moving along."

I didn't say anything.

"One more question before I go. What's your real name?"

"The one I gave you. Paul Anderson."

"Uh-huh. Well, I might like to talk to you again, Paul. Take some notes."

"Any time. You know where to find me."

He went away.

I drank and watched the sunlight sparkle on Round Bay, throw

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sharp glints off the brightwork on the pleasure craft. After a while Jocko came over and blocked my view.

"You tell that mon how you steal all that money in San Francisco?"

"I told him."

Big grin. "Beautiful wife, fancy villa in Charlotte Amalie, rich mon's life before it all go away and you end up here."

"The whole story."

"What he say?"

"I don't think he believed it."

"Somebody might, someday," Jocko said. "Wrong mon think you still got plenty money left, he try to steal it from you."

"Or the law might come and take me away to jail."

"I don't like to see that hoppen."

"Of course not. Then you'd go out of business."

He laughed

I laughed, too.

The fan hummed, the flies circled. Clouds were beginning to pile up along the crest of Bordeaux Mountain; there might be some rain later on. A sleek blue-and-white yawl came gliding in from the sea. From a distance she looked like the Annalise—a thirty-footer with a clipper bow and enough beam to handle weather in blue water. I watched her for a time, but not very long.

I wondered where Annalise was now, what she was doing. But I didn't really care.

I wondered how much money I had left. I could look at my bank book when I got back to the saltbox, but I knew I wouldn't. I didn't really care.

I wondered if Talley would come back. I wondered if he would contact my old firm in San Francisco, turn me in to the FBI. I hoped he would, but I didn't really care.

I sat there.

Would I really do it over again if I had the chance? I'd been telling myself I would for so long that saying it out loud to somebody else had become second nature. But it was a lie. And so was the conceit that I had committed a perfect crime. Two more lies in the fabric of falsehoods and deceptions that made up my life.

Jocko brought me another rum. Arundel Cane Rum, the best in the Caribbean, the only kind I would drink. I caught up the glass, emptied it.

"World by the tail, eh, mon?" Jocko said.

"This is my world now," I said. "Jocko's Cafe and Arundel rum and what I can see through this window."

He laughed.

This time I didn't laugh with him. ●

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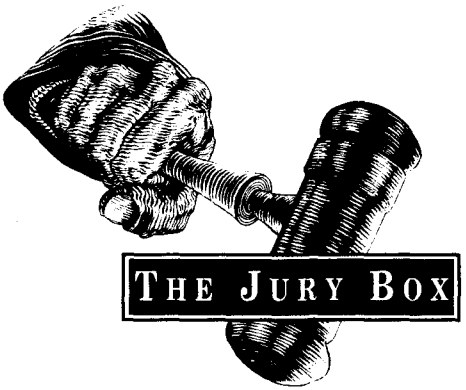

by Jon L. Breen

There is a resurgence of interest, through reprinting and new works in the style, of the paperback original mysteries of the 1950s through the '70s: typically fast-moving, violent and sexy, terse and colorful in their prose and dialogue, and unlike most of the current product in their brevity and tight plotting. Their main literary influences were various crime and mainstream, pulp and hardcover writers of the '30s and '40s, including Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, John O'Hara, and above all Dashiell Hammett, one of whose last chapters has been recycled in an infinite number of variations. A minor literary but major commercial influence was Mickey Spillane, whose early novels in paperback reprint did much to spur the market.

Byline: Mickey Spillane (Crippen & Landru, $20 trade paper; $48 signed limited hardcover) is the latest of several collections of his shorter work. The introduction by editors Max Allan Collins and Lynn F. Myers, Jr. provides fresh biographical insights. The contents are over half nonfiction, mostly from '50s men's magazines, but there are three Mike Hammer stories (two subsequently expanded into novels, one new to print) and three comic-book reprints about Hammer-like private eyes. Also included is a letter to Carroll John Daly acknowledging Spillane's stylistic debt to Daly's Race Williams stories from *Black Mask*. The limited hardcover includes an audio CD of short Hammer adventures, one with Spillane himself in the starring role.

The various reprints, considered in order of original publication date, provide one gem after another. Paul S. Meskil's 1954 police novel *Sin Pit* (Gryphon, $16), the only published fiction of a well-known nonfiction crime writer, exemplifies erotic noir, with a vivid picture of East St. Louis's sordid vice scene and expert enough

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writing and plotting to justify publisher Gary Lovisi's claim that Meskil might have become a major crime-fiction writer.

Douglas Sanderson may be closest to Spillane in extremity of violence, but he offers literate prose and sharp dialogue along with frantic action in a pairing of two of his novels, *Pure Sweet Hell / Catch a Fallen Starlet* (Stark House, $19.95), published in 1957 (as by Malcolm Douglas) and 1960 respectively. The first is about drug smuggling in Spain with an unlikely FBI agent as hero, while the second provides a knowing and jaundiced view of its Hollywood background.

Lawrence Block's *Grifter's Game* (Hard Case, $6.99), originally published in 1961 as *Mona,* is a classic crime novel, with a compelling narrative impetus and an unforgettable shock ending. Told by a gigolo whose infatuation with a femme fatale leads him to murder, it shows how good Block was at the very beginning of his distinguished career, while foreshadowing the mostly but not completely amoral criminal protagonists who would occupy some of his later fiction.

James McKimmey's 1962 thriller of office politics and adultery *Squeeze Play* (POINT*BLANK*/Wildside, $15.95 trade paper, $29.95 hardcover), with an introduction by Jason Starr, deftly captures the San Francisco Bay Area suburbs and the Lake Tahoe casino scene. The elaborate frame-up and its neat resolution may strain credulity a bit, but the writing and characterization mark the author worthy of rediscovery.

James Reasoner's obscurely published 1980 novel *Texas Wind* (POINT*BLANK*/Wildside, $15.99 trade paper, $29.95 hardcover), introduced by Ed Gorman, lives up to its cult reputation as a lost gem with an unpredictable plot, a strong evocation of locale, and a likably low-key, non-wisecracking narrator in private eye Cody.

The first three new titles from a publishing imprint devoted to recapturing the '50s paperback-original style are all splendidly done, right down to the "girl art" on the covers.

*** Max Phillips: *Fade to Blonde,* Hard Case, $6.99. Wannabe screenwriter Roy Corson's job of protecting the enigmatic beauty Rebecca LaFontaine involves him with all the major noir vices: porn, prostitution, drugs, and murder. This loving homage registers better on style, mood, and ambience than plot and pace, but it has a good windup, tough prose and dialogue throughout, and appropriate echoes of Hammett (including a major clue), Chandler, and Cain. The setting is Hollywood of the mid twentieth century, but dueling references to Nelson Eddy and Chubby Checker make it hard to pin down exactly when.

*** Domenic Stansberry: *The Confession,* Hard Case, $6.99. This psychological thriller may remind you more of Vin Packer,

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Jim Thompson, or Robert Bloch. San Francisco Bay Area forensic psychologist Jake Danser is not precisely an unreliable narrator, but he makes clear from the first that he is being highly selective in what he chooses to tell. From gripping beginning to chilling finish, the reader is invited to wonder if he is in fact a serial murderer.

*** Richard Aleas: *Little Girl Lost,* Hard Case, $6.99. In a formidable first novel, young New York private eye John Blake tries to find out why his high school girlfriend, an honor student with medical aspirations, wound up in the *Daily News* as a murdered stripper. The relationship of Blake and his ageing boss reminded me of Fredric Brown's excellent Ed and Am Hunter series. The paperback, with a new cover by celebrated illustrator Robert McGinnis, was preceded by a small hardcover edition (Five Star, $25.95). Aleas is the anagrammatical pseudonym of *EQMM* contributor Charles Ardai.

*** Lindsey Davis: *Scandal Takes a Holiday,* Mysterious, $24.95. In typical amusing form, Marcus Didius Falco tangles with pirates and a kidnapping ring in the port of Ostia while seeking a vanished gossip columnist for the *Daily Gazette.* Yes, we're still in Ancient Rome, though Falco, girlfriend Helena, and their world seem modern as ever.

*** John Mortimer: *Rumpole and the Penge Bungalow Murders,* Viking, $24.95. While the landmark early-1950s case, in which Rumpole defends (alone and without a leader) Simon Jerold on charges of shooting to death his father and a neighbor, both members of a World-War-II bombing crew, is not as intricate and surprising as longtime readers might have hoped, there is much humor and nostalgia for fans of the series in this second Rumpole novel. We also learn the origin of his unlikely marriage to Hilda Wystan, daughter of his head of chambers and later to be known as She Who Must Be Obeyed.

** Daniel Klein: *Such Vicious Minds,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95. In Memphis of 1965, the intelligent, likable, sometimes naive but often surprisingly sophisticated Elvis Presley (an unlikely amateur detective in his fourth case) is so impressed with *Dr. Strangelove,* he invites to Graceland screenwriter Terry Southern, who becomes his Watson when Col. Tom Parker is arrested for the murder of a blackmailer. Though I couldn't fault it on period detail, outside of a few expressions in dialogue, the novel is undistinguished in plot and only sporadically interesting in its farcical situations and popular-culture observations.

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The Reunion

by Eric Wright

Celebrated Canadian crime writer Eric Wright was born in London and emigrated to Canada at the age of twenty-two. For his novels and stories in the mystery genre he has won numerous awards, including the Arthur Ellis Award and the Derrick Murdoch Award for Lifetime Achievement. His latest tale for us involves a mystery of sorts, but whether there's a crime, we'll leave up to you. ¶

I ran into Billy one afternoon at Sandown Park between races, in the tea lineup in the refreshment room. It took a long time to find the name to put to the face, but I was well past the point where I could be mistaken, and he didn't look away. Afterwards, I wondered how long he'd been seeing me before I noticed him. He was a couple of people ahead in the line, and when we were sure of the eye contact, he moved back to where I was. "Stan?" he asked. "Stan Collier, isn't it?"

"Billy Sutton," I said, and we shook hands.

It occurred to me afterwards that we shook hands that day for the first time ever, as far as I could remember, even though we'd been together from the beginning. We joined up together and stayed together all through Dunkirk. Actually, for us it was Le Havre, not Dunkirk. Billy and I were picked up off the beach by one of the navy rowboats which took us out to their ship, the last one still waiting for survivors. We had a bit of an argument on the beach, because Billy said he couldn't swim in his boots, and I said I couldn't walk out across the pebbles without mine. We'd been retreating for a week and my feet were so sore I was afraid that only my boots were holding them together. In the end we compromised by walking out in our boots until the water was up to our waists, then kicking them off and trying to swim a bit. It was a good thing the sailors got to us right away, because neither of us could do much more than the dog paddle we'd learned on holidays at the seaside. After we landed, I had to wear slippers for a week until I could get my boots on again.

After Le Havre we stayed together in the same mob, the Royal Army Service Corps, in a supply battalion at a depot up in York-

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shire near Catterick racecourse, until we were fit to go again.

As soon as we could march, we were shipped off to Greece to help out with the Italian invasion. I understand we coped pretty well with the Eyeties at first—our army, I mean—and then Jerry arrived to help out his ally, and we were in retreat again.

We regrouped and crossed to Crete just in time to get the order to retreat. Billy and I walked for two nights across Crete, one canteen of water between the two of us, and on the third night we were sucking the biscuit crumbs out of the linings of our trouser pockets. Dozens of us, probably hundreds, if you could see them, shuffled through the dark, many in pairs, one helping out the other who had gone lame, stopping sometimes to retie their boots or just to have a rest. One soldier was sitting by the roadside alongside his mate who was sleeping and he waved us down to get a mouthful of water for his friend. When we got close, we saw his friend was dead, and we told him to come along with us, but he only shook his head. He'd come to the end of the road. We saw two or three like that, stopped, waiting for Jerry to come along and take them prisoner, or shoot them. During the third night I lost Billy, and didn't see him again until after the fourth race at Sandown, twenty years later.

Sandown was the one place where I was likely to bump into him, and if I hadn't thought he had gone for good that night in Crete, "missing in action," I might have had my antennae tuned in for an encounter. As it was, I first wondered where I had once seen that face, now ten feet away—perhaps in the paper, or on the telly, and then it became more personal, a neighbour perhaps, as he returned the look I was giving him and I tried to sort him out. And then who it was announced itself, still without a name until he spoke mine, and then it was Billy.

We collected our tea and confirmed by individual observation that each of us was on his own, and we walked over to a vacant table and sat down.

The way we were, you'd think we were two brothers, living in different parts of the world, not communicating much if at all over the years, come together at a funeral, say, arriving early before anyone else turned up, wondering where to start. "Why didn't you write?" would be the first question, followed by, "Why didn't *you?*"

We sipped our tea and waited to see who would find the right button.

"Thought you were a ghost at first," he said. He didn't smile.

"Twenty years," I said, eventually. "Maybe I am."

"Twenty-two."

I don't think he meant it as a challenge, though that's what it sounded like.

But it was too soon to get into it. "Fancy anything for the next race?" I asked.

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He looked at his newspaper, marked up before he left home, probably. "This one belongs to Piggott, I reckon," he said.

I thought so, too. "Got your money on yet?"

He nodded.

"Wait here, then, while I put a bet on. I want to watch this one from the rail, so if we miss each other, I'll meet you back here after the race."

"How long should I wait?" He leaned back, watching me.

"What do you mean?" I asked. But I knew what he meant.

"You might get detained," he said.

There was no mistaking his meaning now, but I wasn't ready for it yet. "I'll be here," I said.

The crowd was thick that afternoon, so when I went back after the fifth, and again after the sixth, and there was no sign of him, I let it go. I knew I would see him again soon.

He was there at the next race meeting, two weeks later, waiting at the same table with his tea before the first race. I wondered if he had gone through the same process that I had. Missing him had been no accident. I'd gone back after the sixth race, all right, but I didn't wait when he wasn't there right away.

But not to go to the next meeting would have been unnatural for me, as would not buying a cup of tea before the first race to study the form with.

I said, "I did come back after the last race but there was no sign of you."

"I picked the last winner and there was a lineup at the tote."

"I always bet with the bookies on the last race. That way you get paid off quick and you don't have to wait around."

"That what you did?"

"I didn't have a bet on the last. I just made sure you weren't here, then I left."

"I *was* here. You must have gone already."

"I hung on for a few minutes."

He waited to see if I was finished. "It doesn't matter," he said. "Another time. What do you fancy for the first?"

"Sunny Jim," I said. "He got off to a bad start last time out, but he still only got beaten by a short head. I've been waiting for him to reappear."

"Do you still transfer to Tattersall's if you win the first?" he asked.

"Did I tell you that?"

"Your dad used to do it. Have a big bet on the first and if it comes in, buy yourself a seat in the stands. I always remembered that. You told me about it while we were in that ditch, the first night in Crete. We were waiting for it to get dark enough to make a move."

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"I don't remember."

"I do. I dozed off, but when I woke up you were still talking, about the times you'd watched the Derby, that sort of thing."

"That was the idea, wasn't it? Stay awake?"

"Until we realised that we should sleep in shifts so as to be ready for the night march."

"Right. You come to every meeting here?"

"I will now. I worked up north for a long time. Leeds."

"Doing what?"

"Commercial traveller. For Crosse & Blackwell's. When I had enough seniority I put in for a transfer. I'm here for good now. But this is only the second time I've been to Sandown since the war."

"You married?" I asked.

"Twice. First wife died of cancer. Angel, she was. Then I got lucky, found another angel two years ago. Friend of my first wife's, actually. What about you?"

"Married once, then divorced. Nobody's fault. We couldn't get along. Fact is, we weren't suited. But we still have a drink together, now and then."

I found it very strange, catching up on the missing twenty years, and at the same time falling into our old way with each other immediately. In some ways, nothing had changed. He was wearing his hair longer, of course; we both were. And we were in civvies, which showed up the little differences which uniforms hide. He was one of those blokes who dress to disappear, who think if anyone notices what they are wearing then there's something wrong. But I was still trying to impress women, as well as look good on the job. I worked for a travel agent in Kensington. That day I was wearing my new duffel coat, an Austrian loden coat, actually. Dark green.

The horses moved on to the course for the next race, and paraded in front of the stands. "You doing this one?" Billy asked.

"I haven't found anything to fancy yet."

"What about Last Call?"

"I'd noticed that. Might be a possibility."

He had been doing what I was, what everybody does sometimes, not finding a horse he fancied, so falling back on the jockey on the grounds that good jockeys like good horses. Apart from that, it was just a matter of fancying a name. For some reason, Last Call, a useless twenty-to-one shot, had caught his eye. He stood up. "See you back here?"

It was a test again, a little challenge: Did I plan to come back after the race?

I felt in my watch pocket for the fiver I kept for emergencies. "Let's have it each way," I said, holding out the note.

He looked in his wallet to find a fiver to go with it. "We're on," he said, and disappeared towards the line of bookies.

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While he was gone, I tried to pick my way across the minefield that lay between us, going over again in my mind the events of that night in Crete.

We had been walking for two nights, hiding from Stukas during the day as we made our way to the coast. We had lost touch with the rest of our unit when the retreat turned into a shambles. Billy and I weren't part of the regular infantry; the Service Corps was what its name says, the backup brigade. We had rifles, of course, until we threw them away, but that wasn't our function; our job was to move supplies—ammunition, equipment, and so on—to where they were needed, to get them to the troops who were doing the actual fighting. Billy and I were left in charge of a small dump of supplies—rations, mostly—protecting them from the local population. Then one morning everything went quiet and we waited for a messenger with some orders, but he never appeared. Then Billy pointed and said, "We'd better scarper if we can." A couple of furlongs away, a Jerry bicycle platoon appeared, not coming towards us but crossing at right angles to us, four of them. Our front line had gone and these Jerries were the sign that we had been overrun.

When we had retreated in France, we knew where we were most of the time. You could hear and feel Jerry advancing as all round us our own soldiers were grouping and regrouping, fighting a rear-guard action. This, now, was a bit eerie, just four cyclists in uniform looking as if they were out for a ride.

"Where's our mob?" I wondered.

Billy said, "They haven't passed us, and I don't hear them in the distance. I reckon there's been an order to cease fire and no one has told us."

I thought Billy had probably guessed right. "Shall we chuck it in, then? Wait for them?" I pointed to the cyclists in the distance. "Standing orders says we have to destroy our weapons."

Our Lee Enfield rifles leaned against the wall of the hut we were sleeping in. "That's easy," Billy said. He slid the bolts out of the rifles and threw them into the irrigation ditch. "What about the ammo?"

We gathered together the few hundred rounds of ammunition and the hand grenades and dropped them into the field latrine.

"Bayonets?" Billy asked.

I shook my head. "We might need a tin-opener. Bloody hell! Get your head down!"

One of the cyclists had returned and was now no more than fifty yards away. But it wasn't us he was looking for, and he got back on his bike and rode off.

"I gather we're not surrendering," Billy said. "So what did we destroy the rifles for?"

"Makes us lighter on our feet," I said. "No. This could go on for

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years with us in a Jerry prison camp living on black bread and potatoes, if we're lucky. I'm for trying to get out of here. On our own."

Billy nodded. "One last go."

Two more helmets appeared across the field. "Now," I said.

We made a run for it through the olive trees and then across a stony field, past a dead goat still tied to a post, running until we couldn't see the cyclists, and then started to walk, south to the sea, we hoped.

We had water—it was standing orders to keep our bottles full at all times—and I'd hung on to my small pack with its bandages and iodine and an issue of biscuits. Billy had left his small pack behind when we ran, so I divided the biscuits between us. We stuffed the field dressings and the iodine into our pockets, and I threw away my pack and we started to walk.

At first, once we were well out of sight of the cyclists, it looked like plain sailing. We knew enough to go south, and it was easy to find footpaths. During that first morning, while we were still moving in daylight, we picked up one or two stragglers like ourselves, pairs of men, often one limping, leaning on the other, and the landscape started to fill up with us, all heading south. There are lots of stones in Crete and I was glad when we found ourselves on a paved road going our way, but now Billy said, "Let's go round those olive trees." He pulled me towards the grove on our right.

Normally our relationship was such that I was the leader and spokesman if one was necessary, so I was surprised at him asserting himself, but I let him lead us through the trees on a parallel course with the crowd on the road. Half an hour later we watched from a distance as a staff car appeared on the road, driven by a major. The truck stopped and the major jumped down to stand in the road. He had red hair and one of those little bristly moustaches. "We're making a stand here," he shouted. "We've got to create a diversion to give the regiment a chance to regroup. N.C.O.'s to the front." It was an order.

We were N.C.O.'s. We'd got our lance-corporal's stripes by surviving Le Havre.

A sergeant stepped forward. "Sir," he said. "This mob couldn't make a stand against a boy-scout troop and you are a bleeding lunatic who wants to die. I don't."

The major looked around for someone to arrest the sergeant, but just then three Stukas came out of the sky and raked the crowd with machine-gun fire; back and forth they went as we watched from the trees. The planes stayed in the sky, hovering like carrion birds, using anything that moved for target practice. We found an

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orchard to wait in until dark, when we could move unseen. That first day we ate the biscuit and drank some of the water.

That night we walked forward, avoiding the groups of stragglers who had started to reappear. We had nothing to eat the second day, and on the third day we tore out the linings of our pockets to suck out the biscuit crumbs. In the early hours we ran out of water and stopped to fill up the canteen at a well, but the water was putrid. At that point I didn't want to go on. I've had varicose veins all my life and my legs wouldn't stop hurting, and now my foot was paining me, too, and we had to have water soon. We sat down by the well, and Billy told me to stay there while he went for water. I never saw him again, until now.

While I waited for him to come back, I took off my boot, slid it off, rather, because it was full of blood. I dried it up as best I could with a field dressing. Once I'd got it tidied up, it wasn't as bad as it looked, but a stone had got wedged under the ankle bone and cut a little hole where the blood was draining out. At the same time, an insect the size of a cockroach had got into my boot below the laces, and, as I surmised, tried to bite its way out. There were five or six marks where it had stung or bitten me, now all swollen up. I don't know what kind of insect it was—a Greek insect—but I decided it wasn't a scorpion or anything like that or I would be dead. Then, as I was dabbing at the bites, I must have pulled off a scab because a thin jet of blood shot out, strong enough to travel a yard before it hit the ground. I got frightened because I thought I'd opened an artery. I've found out since that with an artery you get a pumping action, but all I could think of was how to make a tourniquet. While I was panicking it stopped just with the pressure of my thumb and I found I could keep it stopped with a field dressing.

The next bit is hazy. I must have passed out or just fallen asleep and when I came round Billy had evidently been and gone. There was a small sheet of Greek newspaper beside me with a piece of grey bread and a lump of cheese, that soft white stuff. I ate a couple of mouthfuls, and then I passed out again. When I came round the second time, it had been more than an hour since Billy first went off and I tried to think what that meant. There wasn't much I could do but wait. I knew the beach wasn't far away, but I couldn't get my boot back on, my foot had swollen up so. I sat there, not knowing what to prepare myself for, and along came a German motorcycle and sidecar. I stood up and put my hands on my head to show I was unarmed, but as they got close, even by moonlight I could see that the helmets weren't German; in fact, these blokes were bareheaded.

"This the road to Sphakia?" the bloke in the sidecar shouted, in an accent that I knew but couldn't place. One of ours, anyway.

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"It is," I said. "Want me to show you? I know the road well. I'm a transport driver. Been over it a dozen times."

They looked at each other. "What happened to you?"

I identified the accent now. Australians, or New Zealanders. "Caught one in the foot," I said. "Stuka. Shot up my engine. The rest of our patrol bought it. I was lucky."

The driver twisted the grip, revving the engine. "We've lost our unit," he said. "Seen any New Zealanders come by?"

"No," I said. "But I'll help you look."

"You on your own?"

"I had a mate," I said. "He went off to find some water, a couple of hours ago. He must have come back and gone off again. He left me this bread and cheese."

"Which way did he go?"

I pointed.

"There be dragons," he said. "You won't see him again. The bastards are ahead of us and on both sides. This is the last road out."

The man in the sidecar said, "Get in behind me. We'll drop you off with the first ambulance we pass."

I didn't know much after that. They gave me some water, which I drank too quickly and brought up. Then I passed out. I remember lying on a stretcher; there was a rowboat, then a ship, then I woke up in a camp in the desert, where I spent the next two months getting fit again.

Now, drinking tea between races in Sandown Park (Last Call came seventh out of eight), listening to my story, Billy said, "Did you look for me in the camp?"

"No, I didn't," I said. "I was afraid I would find you alive and in one piece."

"You thought I'd left you there and gone ahead on my own?"

"I didn't know, did I?"

He said, "Let me get a bet on this last race. Then let's have a pint at the bar."

I said, "The bar closes right after the race."

"Then we can go over to the bleeding pub by the station, can't we?"

I could see what he wanted, a chance to think, mostly. I thought I would give him fifteen minutes, enough time to collect his winnings and come and find me. He was back five minutes after the race. "No luck?" I asked.

He held up some notes. "Ten quid," he said. "Paid for my afternoon."

We turned and walked across the course towards the railway station. "We can do this another time," I said.

"Unless you're in a hurry, I'd like you to hear my story, too," he said. "Been twenty-two years."

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The pub was nearly empty. We settled down in a corner with a couple of light ales, and he started in right away.

"About a quarter of a mile away from us there was what looked like an empty farmhouse, but I'd seen a shadow cross the yard. There was no one about when I reached the farmhouse. I turned the kitchen upside down looking for something to bring you back but all I could find was a crock of olives. I walked through every room and didn't find anybody home, but I was sure I'd seen that shadow so I did the old trick of slamming a door, then sat down to wait. Soon the trapdoor I hadn't noticed lifted itself from the kitchen floor and a head poked out, an old woman. I got my foot under the trapdoor and kicked it open, and the old woman started screaming, then blubbing, and there were a couple of kids down there, as well as the goats by the smell of it, and they all got into it. I made shushing noises and when she quietened down I pointed to my mouth and she passed up the bread and cheese I left you and a bottle of wine. Wine would have been a mistake in our condition, of course, but I couldn't make her understand I wanted water, so I left with the bread and cheese, which I brought back to you, and I took off again with the canteen to find some water. Halfway back, I heard a commotion coming from the farmhouse and I went close enough to see a party of Jerries pushing the old woman and the kids into the yard. Then they set fire to the house. It was so bright I was afraid I would be seen, so I waited until the soldiers had gone, leaving the family to watch their home burn. I suppose, when it was cool enough, they could still go down to the cellar. I don't know.

"I still didn't have any water, but I'd been away a long time so I decided we'd have to manage on a few sips of wine, if we wanted to get away. Then, almost as soon as I turned to go, I nearly fell down the family's well. I drew up a bucket and it was sweet and cold and freaking marvellous—I can still taste it—and I filled our canteen and headed back to you."

I said, "And I was gone, of course."

"Not quite. I saw them take you away. I was that close."

"Saw *who* take me away?"

"The two Jerries with the motorbike. The ones I thought took you prisoner."

"You *thought?*"

"Yeah. It was a German bike, I could tell that from the sound."

"All right. What then?"

"How do you mean?"

"What did you do next?"

"I kept walking towards the coast. I got to Sphakia. I had to dodge about a bit because some keen types were assembling rearguards, like that arsehole major, using the odds and sods to cover

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the fighting troops. I was no use to them, having no gun, but I couldn't see explaining that, so I left them to it. It took two days to get to the beach. But once I got there it was simple, a navy lifeboat came to the edge, someone shouted, "Last call for the *Skylark,*" and someone hauled me over the side, and then we were climbing up a rope net into a destroyer, which made a run for it. I remember we had to go between two rocks and I saw the boat ahead of us turn over when the Stukas dive-bombed it, and the one after us went the same way, but I think we were just a bit too quick for them. Then I woke up in a camp in the desert, just like you. I was there for a month, made sergeant, and posted to Eritrea to fight the Eyeties. After that it was pretty cushy."

"You didn't come looking for me when you were in the camp?"

"Last time I saw you, you were on the back of a Jerry motorbike. Prisoner of war, like. Right?" He waited for my reaction.

"They weren't Jerries—"

He cut me off. "By the time I got to the camp, I'd found out what really happened, and I didn't see the point of looking for you. Let it go, I thought."

"*What?* Let *what* go?"

He took his time about responding to that. Then, in that flat voice soldiers use when replying to a question from an officer, he said, "While I was on the beach waiting, wondering whether to give myself up when the Jerries arrived, because it looked as if the last boat had come and gone, I wondered if we'd find ourselves in the same batch of prisoners, you and me. That was when someone on the beach told me about seeing these New Zealanders on a Jerry motorbike."

"So you knew I'd got away."

"I knew you hadn't waited around, yes. Not after they offered you a ride."

"I thought *you'd* gone, left me with the bread and cheese, like."

"That why you didn't look me up, after the war, too? You knew where I lived."

"You took me home once, when we had a three-day pass before we shipped out to Greece."

"That's right."

"Seems clear now, doesn't it?"

"I suppose it does, yeah." He brushed a crumb off his tie. "I've thought about it every day for twenty-two years."

"And?"

"I tried to keep an open mind."

"Now you know. Right?"

"Now we *both* know," he said.

"I suppose we do."

"Another pint?" It was his turn.

"Not this time. When's the next race meeting?"

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"Here? Couple of weeks. Why did you think I would have gone without you?"

"My foot. I couldn't walk. You would have been stuck with me."

"I would never have done that." He stood up.

"No."

"What about the next meeting here? You coming?"

"I'll look out for you."

"I'll do the same."

We travelled back on the train to Clapham Junction together, not saying much, certainly nothing about Crete. I changed at Clapham Junction for East Croydon. He stayed on the train. I offered him a hand, which he shook without standing up. "Maybe Derby Day?" I offered. "Up on the downs?" It was something we'd promised each other we would do after the war.

"If I go, I'll keep my eyes open for you," he said.

I got out and the train started to move. I gave him a bit of a wave, and he nodded, and then he was gone.

I didn't see him again. I didn't actually stop going to Sandown altogether: There was no need for that. On the other hand, there was no great urge to bump into him again.

I'm an old man now, but I still turn the whole thing over in my mind, not every day, but often. ●

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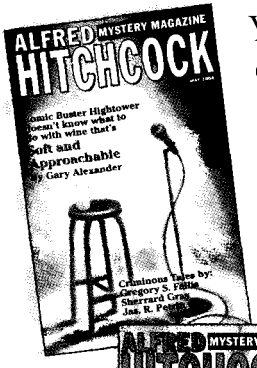

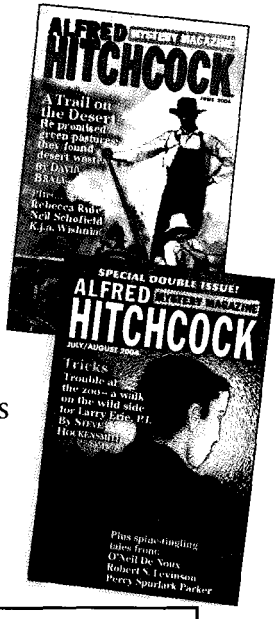

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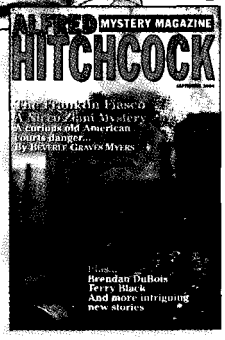

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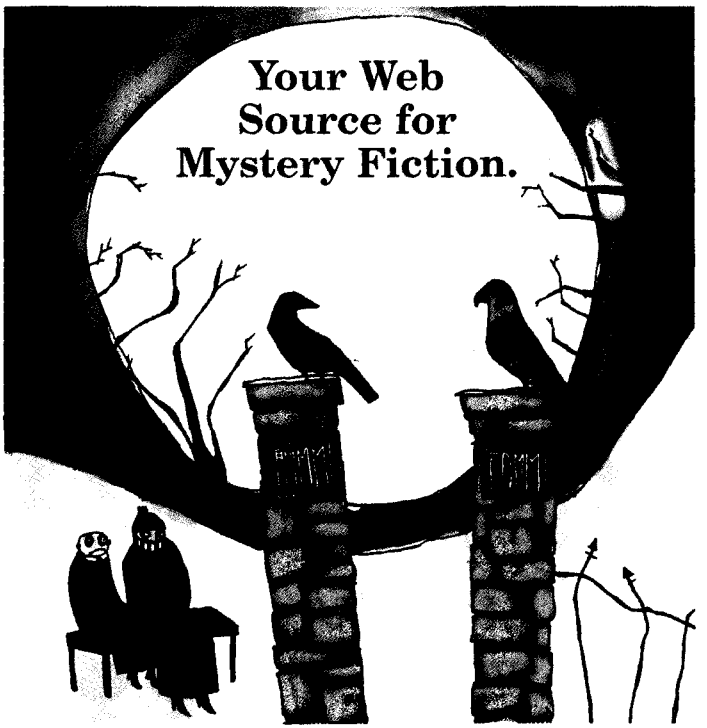

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